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Masquerade or drag? Bette Davis and the ambiguities of gender

MARTIN SHINGLER

Something rather odd happens halfway through Bette Davis's 1945 film *The Corn is Green* (Irving Rapper). Davis, as Miss Moffat, descends a staircase carrying a bowl of flowers and sporting an uncharacteristic addition to her usual costume, a white shawl draped around her shoulders. It is odd because the Miss Moffat we have seen up until now has had little to do with such feminine accessories. An independent woman dedicated to educating the children of a small Welsh mining community, she has so far seemed somewhat masculine, more feminist than feminine and rather militaristic in manner, speech and dress. Above all, she has displayed her love of knowledge and her low opinion of men. But now, quite suddenly, she appears on the staircase professing her love of flowers to her arch enemy, the local Squire. More surprising still, she proceeds to flatter the Squire and apologize for her previously 'overwrought' behaviour towards him.

Seating herself before the fireplace, Miss Moffat offers her guest tea, adding that there is nothing stronger in a house of women and allowing him his reply that the feminine tummy is like the feminine mind, 'a bit on the weak side'. This is really rather galling since the comment comes from the most weak-minded of all the characters in the film. 'How right you are, Squire! We're not exactly rugged creatures are we?' sighs Miss Moffat, leaning back heavily against her armchair in an apparent state of exhaustion and simultaneously feigning a headache. In the meantime, however, she shoots a piercing look at the gullible man through her fingers. Reassured that he is

suitably deceived by her performance of feminine frailty, Davis intones in a noticeably higher, softer and more melodic voice than usual, ‘you see, in one’s womanly enthusiasm, one forgets that the qualities vital to success in a venture of this sort are lacking in one: intelligence, courage and authority’. ‘In short’, she adds, ‘the qualities of a man’ – the very qualities that Miss Moffat has indeed been seen to possess. ‘And like a true woman, I have to scream for help to a man’, she declares with her arms extended in an appeal of openness and vulnerability, ‘to you!’

Having thus gained the attention, good faith and sympathy of the Squire, Miss Moffat becomes more herself as she describes her pupil’s need of a ‘protector’. Her efforts to win her guest’s compliance with her plans not only succeed but endear him to her, an emotion expressed by his words, ‘serene, dear lady’. Miss Moffat finally brings her performance to a close with an artful flourish: ‘Thank you again, Squire, from the bottom of a grateful heart’. Moreover, her speech is delivered with her head lowered deferentially to one side and her hand pressed melodramatically to her heart. Upon his departure, however, she flings the shawl from her shoulders and strides through the house to her study, declaring that the man ‘is so stupid that it sits on him like a halo!’ and informing her female companion that ‘we have met the Squire and he is ours’. ‘Won’, she adds, with ‘soft soap and curtseying’.

Soft soap and curtseying have long been regarded as one of the ultimate feminine modes. But in 1929, Joan Riviere wrote of such behaviour in specifically psychoanalytic terms in her essay ‘Womanliness as masquerade’.¹ Her purpose was to demonstrate the ways in which women assume a mask of womanliness to disguise their masculinity (such as, for instance, their intelligence or power). Womanliness, in the form of sexually-provocative behaviour accompanied by excessively feminine costume, could be adopted as a mask in order to avert male retribution should the woman’s masculinity be discovered. In her article, Riviere described the ways in which intellectual women of her acquaintance, following or during displays of their masculinity (through, say, public speaking), compulsively sought male attentions by flattery and flirtatious behaviour or by the wearing of excessively feminine clothing and makeup, actions incompatible with their status as lecturers, writers and academics. But she also described non-academic women who used the same forms of behaviour, suggesting that this was undoubtedly a common feature of many (or even most) women’s lives. One particular example she cited was a housewife, a woman quite capable of attending to ‘typically masculine matters’ but who, when dealing with workmen, would disguise all her technical knowledge and behave in a deferential manner. Riviere described how, in her dealings with tradesmen, this intelligent and capable woman would feel herself performing the role of a silly, uneducated and confused woman, but

1 Joan Riviere, ‘Womanliness as masquerade’ (1929), in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 35–44.

with the result that she invariably succeeded in getting these men to conform to her own opinions.

Joan Riviere interpreted the behaviour of her colleagues, acquaintances and friends according to Freudian precepts. Ultimately, the excessive femininity of these women was seen as the result of an unconscious fear of reprisal by their fathers (or father-figures), who would punish them for their masculine aspirations. Given her training as a Freudian psychoanalyst, such a conclusion is hardly surprising. One can only speculate as to how Riviere might have interpreted the behaviour of her female associates had she been a sociologist. A preoccupation with the social reasons behind the (conscious) adoption of excessively feminine modes of dress and behaviour by intelligent women of her acquaintance might have led Riviere to seek an explanation in terms of sexual inequality (political, legal and economic). As such, womanliness-as-masquerade might have seemed more the result of social powerlessness rather than an unconscious fear of reprisal by the father. I mention this because although one can certainly pursue both the unconscious and the psychoanalytic dimensions of femininity-as-masquerade, I see no reason why one should be obliged to employ the concept in specifically psychoanalytic terms. Indeed, the psychoanalytic explanation could even be said to obscure the social factors which might well make it necessary (particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth century) for women to disguise those aspects of masculinity which they possess or desire.²

2 Masquerade has, of course, been employed specifically as a psychoanalytic concept in film theory, most notably in Mary Ann Doane's work on female spectatorship, 'Film and the masquerade: theorizing the female spectator', *Screen*, vol. 23, nos 3-4 (1982), pp. 74-87; and Doane, 'Masquerade reconsidered: further thoughts on the female spectator', *Femmes Fatales* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 33-43. The first use of Riviere's concept, however, was by Claire Johnston in 1975, 'Femininity and the masquerade: Anne of the Indies', in Claire Johnston and Paul Willlemen (eds), *Jacques Tourneur* (Edinburgh Film Festival, 1975), pp. 36-44. See also John Fletcher, 'Versions of masquerade', *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 3 (1988), pp. 43-70.

The similarities between the women described by Riviere and Miss Moffat in *The Corn is Green* are striking, but there is an important difference. The behaviour of Riviere's acquaintances was supposedly unconscious and compulsive, whilst Miss Moffat's performance of feminine frailty is clearly conscious and purposeful. As such, a psychoanalytic explanation for the actions of Davis's character in *The Corn is Green* would seem to have less relevance. Another important difference, moreover, is that this particular performance works to display for us (the audience) Miss Moffat's essential masculinity rather than disguise it beneath a feminine facade. The real woman is clearly not the frail creature ingratiating herself with the Squire and deferring to his judgement. Rather, she is to be seen peering behind her fingers at the man, subjecting him to a knowing look.

The Corn is Green is one of several instances where Bette Davis exploited the ironies and ambiguities of gender. Throughout the 1940s, Davis established for herself an ambiguous gender identity which usually manifested itself in terms of androgyny. In films like *Jezebel* (William Wyler, 1938), *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (Michael Curtiz, 1939), *The Great Lie* (Edmund Goulding, 1941), *The Little Foxes* (William Wyler, 1941) and *Old Acquaintance* (Vincent Sherman, 1943) Davis played a series of women who were as masculine as they were feminine, adopting aspects of male attire (pants, tailored jackets, flat shoes), behaviour (smoking, shooting,

drinking) and/or attitudes (ambition, aggression, independence) whilst retaining more conventionally feminine qualities such as heightened emotion and vulnerability. But alongside her portrayals of androgynous women, Davis also created a number of female characters who were excessively (extraordinarily) feminine. In this article I shall concentrate on one of these roles and examine some of the implications of Davis's propensity to take femininity to its extreme. Although I shall begin by trying to understand Davis's creation of an excessive femininity in terms of Riviere's notion of masquerade, I shall also consider the usefulness of conceiving of this particular performance in terms of drag (female impersonation).

Bette Davis's *Mr. Skeffington* (Vincent Sherman, 1944) would seem to present her most extreme and sustained example of femininity-as-masquerade. It is the story of a beautiful and feminine woman whose vanity and selfishness are eventually punished when her body succumbs to the ageing process, forcing her to accept the notion that a woman is only beautiful when she is loved. Bette Davis was a curious choice for the part of Fanny Skeffington, the beautiful and feminine woman who, at the age of twenty-five, has every man in New York at her feet. It was curious because Davis herself was never considered a great beauty, as an article appearing in *Modern Screen* in September 1938 made perfectly clear. Interviewed by Gladys Hall, Davis was reported to have declared that she couldn't stand her own face, that she thought her eyes bulged like bullfrogs, that her mouth was horrible and that her body had about as much sex appeal as a pelican.³ It is not surprising, therefore, that she hesitated before accepting this role.

At thirty-five years of age, Davis had to spend the first hour of *Mr. Skeffington* playing a twenty-five-year-old beauty, prior to ageing dramatically following a bout of diphtheria. The film's significance lay clearly in creating a sharp contrast between a woman at her most beautiful and her eventual transformation, ravaged by time and illness. So to achieve the effect of youth and beauty, a not particularly beautiful Davis portrayed her character with an excessive femininity. In the early scenes, she is costumed in lace and silk, her hair a mass of soft curls, with a large feather boa and fan highlighting the overall peacock effect. A succession of costumes which follow over the next few scenes emphasize her excessive and artificial femininity – a mass of flowers, feathers and finery. But the most extraordinary element of this persona is the voice, a falsetto which Davis maintains throughout the entire film. At the time of the film's release, Bosley Crowther described this voice to readers of the *New York Times* as 'the most monotonously affected one you'll ever hear'.⁴

In a follow-up article three days later, Crowther criticized Davis's character as lacking in depth and scope, writing that, 'it is hardly a character in the true sense at all. It is simply a pasteboard creation, a mask labelled "Vanity", animated by Miss Davis with an assortment of ostentatious tricks'.⁵ Here the critic's condemnation of Davis's

³ Gladys Hall, '"Am I homely?" – Bette Davis', *Modern Screen*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1938).

⁴ Bosley Crowther, *New York Times*, 25 May 1944.

⁵ Crowther, 'Dubious Bette: a dopester's comment on Miss Davis, based on her past performances', *New York Times*, 28 May 1944.

Bette Davis – a mass of flowers, feathers and finery in *Mr. Skeffington* (Vincent Sherman, 1944). Picture courtesy: BFI Stills



performance confirms her creation of femininity-as-masquerade. What is missing from his piece, however, is any acknowledgement of what makes the film interesting and pleasurable. In part, the pleasures of watching *Mr. Skeffington* come from recognizing the discrepancies between Davis's own star persona and her role. Certainly, from today's perspective, the mismatch of 'Bette Davis' (professional, tough, ambitious and hardworking) and Fanny Skeffington (vain and frivolous) seem all too obvious. Can we not assume that those audiences familiar with Davis's previous films and publicity would also recognize (and enjoy) the ironies and contradictions of this conflict of star persona and role? If so, then this mismatch – which produces a constant sense of Davis acting a part – would have been instrumental in exposing femininity as a charade, as no more than (in Crowther's words) 'a pasteboard creation', 'a mask' and 'an assortment of ostentatious tricks'.

Of course, the pleasures and meanings of masquerade operate quite differently in *Mr. Skeffington* and *The Corn is Green*. In the latter, the audience is able to enjoy the spectacle of Bette Davis performing the

role of a woman who, like the actress herself, is intelligent, feminist and independent but, at one point in the narrative, conceals these qualities behind a veneer of feminine frailty. In this instance, Davis's own star persona lends credence to Miss Moffat's underlying masculinity and, in consequence, that masculinity frequently peeps through her temporary feminine facade. Miss Moffat's feminine mask is simply a joke at the expense of the Squire, the most important and powerful man in the neighbourhood. To appreciate the joke, the film requires its audience to laugh at the gullibility of the male and, simultaneously, admire the resourcefulness of a woman who would otherwise be at the mercy of male authority. In the former, however, the situation seems rather more complex: complex because there is never any clear explanation of why the character of Fanny Skeffington appears and behaves with such an obvious excess of femininity; complex also because the film defies the expectations of an audience familiar with the Bette Davis persona and the 'Bette Davis film'.

Unlike Miss Moffat, Fanny Skeffington can hardly be regarded as adopting an excessive femininity to disguise her actual masculinity, for she seems neither to possess nor desire anything that could be regarded as masculine. And yet the Davis persona suggests that, at any minute, the character of Fanny Skeffington may suddenly reveal a desire for, say, power or independence. An audience familiar with the work and persona of Bette Davis might even anticipate the kind of transformation of character seen earlier in *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), where the unlikely spectacle of a heavily padded and be-wigged Davis, as the vulnerable and victimized Charlotte Vale, eventually develops into the archetypal Davis heroine, not only svelte and stylish but independent and progressive. And yet, defying such expectations, Fanny Skeffington remains throughout artificial and excessive. She never really allows the archetypal Davis heroine to emerge and, in consequence, the excessive femininity of Fanny Skeffington is never revealed to have all along been a means of disguising her real desire for, or possession of, masculinity. From start to finish, Fanny's only concern is with her own physical beauty.

The function of masquerade in *Mr. Skeffington* seems, therefore, rather more puzzling than in *The Corn is Green*. Rather than lend credence to the character of a woman disguising her masculinity beneath a feminine facade (by which only a fool would be deceived), the Davis persona simply renders Fanny Skeffington incredible. Moreover, Bette Davis's apparent unsuitability for the role and the defiance of audience expectation would seem to be more a source of confusion than pleasure. As Fanny's excessive femininity is maintained from start to finish and any sense of masculinity is absent, masquerade has no obvious role to play in *Mr. Skeffington*. However, the concept of femininity-as-masquerade might be seen to be more appropriate in relation to the film's star than to its central protagonist. Thus, the masquerade of femininity which *Mr. Skeffington* presents

disguises the power and authority which Davis herself wielded throughout the film's production.

A number of Davis's biographers have described how she persisted in determining the outcome of this film herself, adding and changing dialogue, taking complete responsibility for her own hair, costume and makeup, and defying the wishes of her director and producers by wearing a grotesque rubber mask during the later scenes. In fact, her intervention (or interference) eventually reached such a degree that the film's scriptwriters and producers, Julius and Philip Epstein, took the unprecedented step of walking out on their own film. Davis, it is said, antagonized more people during the making of *Mr. Skeffington* than in any other project in her career. Jack Warner, however, was unable to prevent her display of power since she was by this time his most profitable star, the winner of two Academy Awards with a string of box-office successes behind her. In short, by 1944 Davis was at the height of her popularity and no one dared to stop her having her own way. Granted virtually total control over her work, she effectively became her own director and producer.

It is therefore tempting to read Bette Davis's parading of excessive femininity on the screen in 1944 as a disguise of the masculinity she displayed in terms of her power and authority behind the cameras. Riviere's explanation of why women adopt femininity-as-masquerade would seem to indicate that Davis's decision to accept this (patently unsuitable) role was the result of a fear (possibly unconscious) of retribution by those male colleagues and superiors within the film industry whose authority she was apparently usurping. But in another sense, Davis's excessively feminine performance in *Mr. Skeffington* might also be read as the converse, a display (rather than disguise) of her own masculinity. Precisely because her performance was so obviously a masquerade, so excessive and so clearly at odds with her own persona, it would appear to be something of a double bluff. Her refusal to play the part realistically (as her male colleagues wished) suggests her desire to consolidate the androgynous image she had attained in films such as *Jezebel*, *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex*, *The Great Lie* and *Old Acquaintance*. Femininity-as-masquerade gave her the opportunity to express her masculinity without recourse to male attire or any of the more obvious codes of masculinity. In effect, Davis played the role of Fanny Skeffington as if she (Bette Davis) were a man playing a woman. In so doing, she was not so much feminine as effeminate, implying an inherent masculinity which has been self-consciously feminized. In fact, her masquerade of femininity comes remarkably close to that of female impersonation, to drag.

The sense of Bette Davis doing drag in *Mr. Skeffington* intensifies as the narrative develops. Indeed, the second half of the film concentrates

heavily upon many of the qualities associated with female impersonation, namely the use of cosmetics, wigs, girdles, falsies and high heels to conceal the impersonator's inherent maleness. As Fanny Skeffington, attempts to compensate for her loss of youth and beauty with wigs, makeup and costumes-as-disguise, she inadvertently foregrounds the extent to which she is no longer truly feminine (a direct result of her loss of youth and beauty) but she also reveals the extent to which femininity is itself a construction.

It is not only the excessive femininity of drag which Davis captures in *Mr. Skeffington*, but also its mocking and parodic tone. Like the drag queen, Davis holds femininity up to ridicule, highlighting its unnaturalness (constructedness) and demonstrating that femininity is no more than a mask, one which either sex may assume. Whereas the drag queen clearly shows that some men can be as feminine as women, Davis demonstrates that some women can be no more authentically feminine than men (given that her own attempts are no more convincing than those of your average drag queen).

But what, in actual fact, are the most significant effects of drag and to what extent does Davis's version conform to these? At its most complex (and radical) level, drag can be seen to stand in marked contrast to heterosexist norms of gender as a system of mutually exclusive binary oppositions which are determined by – and expressive of – biological/anatomical sex. Such are the claims of many of those who have produced theoretical studies of drag, such as Esther Newton, Judith Butler and Marjorie Garber.⁶ As one of the earliest theorists of female impersonation, Esther Newton noted back in 1972 the way in which male drag artists 'wrench the sex roles loose from that which supposedly determines them, that is genital sex'.⁷ For Newton this is achieved by constructing ambiguous gender identities which involve an 'inside' of one gender (say, masculine) and an 'outside' of its opposite (feminine). In her book *Mother Camp* Newton writes that 'Ultimately, all drag symbolism opposes the "inner" or "real" self (subjective self) to the "outer" self (social self').⁸ More recently, Marjorie Garber has developed these ideas in her own work on cross-dressing, using Newton's anthropological study to support the notion that drag involves 'an exploitation of the opposition between construction and essence'.⁹ In *Vested Interests* Garber considers the process of repeatedly deconstructing femininity to be one of the defining features of drag performance. She describes the way in which the parts that make up the whole in female impersonation – the wig, the falsies and the falsetto voice – are exposed one by one as being artificial, arguing that these destabilizing gestures are institutionalized in drag, hence the doffing of the wig, the momentary lowering of the voice, and the dislodging of the false breast. Thus, in carefully constructing an appearance and continually exposing its artificiality, the drag artist establishes a contradictory identity for himself, one that is made up of a feminine outside (the performer's clothing), a

⁶ Esther Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990); Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁷ Newton, *Mother Camp*, p. 103.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁹ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 152.

masculine inside (the performer's body beneath the clothing) and a feminine inside (his essence or self).

Through this process, drag would seem to offer two significant kinds of effect which could be interpreted as either pleasurable or disturbing depending upon the individual ideology of the viewer. On the one hand, drag offers the possibility of an individual being both masculine and feminine and therefore, in a sense, complete. On the other hand, as Judith Butler argues, drag suggests that the conventions whereby gender is assigned to objects (such as clothing), behaviour (such as excessive posturing) and attitudes (such as vanity) are nothing more than arbitrary laws which, whilst governing our lives, are in fact based on the most tenuous and insubstantial of principles rather than rooted in, and determined by, nature.¹⁰ Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, emphasizes this aspect of drag in order to support her thesis that gender does not express the cultural meanings acquired by the sexed body but that it is the 'very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established'.¹¹ For Butler, the real significance (that is, the subversiveness) of drag is not only that it refutes the notion of 'an essential sex and a true and abiding masculinity or femininity' but also, and more importantly, that it exposes gender as a mechanism for fabricating sexual differences, distinguishing sex from gender and dramatizing those cultural processes which seek to establish and maintain their unity.¹²

Clearly, these are considerable claims for drag, which establish it as a potentially disruptive force within patriarchal and heterosexist cultures, and valorize it (perhaps rather too unproblematically) as a specifically feminist, lesbian and gay strategy for the creation of alternative and subversive identities. But, of course, not everyone would agree with this. Indeed, the feminist debate on drag usually argues that it is, if anything, expressive of patriarchal notions of femininity as superficial, artificial and inauthentic. Others claim that there is an inherent misogyny in drag. For instance, Peter Ackroyd in his book *Dressing Up* writes that 'Drag parodies and mocks women – it is misogynistic both in origin and intent, which transvestism clearly is not'.¹³ Such a claim would certainly seem to undermine drag's status as an alternative to patriarchal and heterosexist gender norms.

In some ways, Judith Butler's arguments are more attractive than persuasive. One reason for this is that Butler does not fully acknowledge the significance of the destabilizing gestures which have become institutionalized within drag performances: that is, those repeated displays of the 'authentic' sexed body of the performer and the artificial and detachable body parts which constitute their image. Marjorie Garber, on the other hand, describes this process as 'a mode of corporeal and gender reassurance'.¹⁴ For Garber, this enables the male drag queen to reassure himself (and his audience, no doubt) that, although having what women have, he (still) has a man's voice, a flat chest and, most importantly, a penis. The repeated exposures of the

¹⁰ See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 136–8.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 7.

¹² Ibid., p. 141.

¹³ Peter Ackroyd, *Dressing Up: the History of an Obsession* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), p. 14.

¹⁴ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p. 152.

'true' sexed body beneath the costume/performance and the simultaneous exposures of the artificial body parts which create the look are reassuring precisely because the male performer's gender (his femininity) cannot refute his 'true' sex (body). Thus, rather than argue (as Butler has done) that drag demonstrates that gender is the fabrication (rather than expression) of sexual differences, one might suggest instead that the female impersonator consistently asserts that gender does not constitute or create sexual difference because the performer's sex (maleness) exists in spite of his adoption of an alternative or oppositional gender identity (femininity).

In most drag performances the disassembling of gender from sex (which Butler's arguments suggest) seldom takes place, and the power and pleasure of drag come less from revealing the fabricating function of gender constituting sexual differences than from defying the social taboos which enforce sexual difference. In doing drag, the female impersonator defies the conventions of gender by acting like a woman rather than a man. This is an act of transgression which involves the pleasures of the prohibited, defying the 'natural' law which proposes that men should be (or, at least, act) masculine. Of course, in so doing, the female impersonator necessarily poses a challenge to the orthodoxy of sexual difference resting upon mutually exclusive categories of the masculine (pertaining to the male) and the feminine (pertaining to the female). In drag, gender (the performer's femininity, signified by costume and behaviour) is at odds with sex (the performer's anatomical maleness, which is repeatedly exposed) but they are most definitely established and presented in relation to each other. Their relationship is one which defies expectation, convention and 'normality' and this is usually achieved in such a way that sexual difference (and the notion of the sexed body) remains intact as an essential and reassuring ground, whilst masculinity and femininity (of psyche and image) are shown to be mutable rather than mutually exclusive. Masculine and feminine are seen to shift and slide but the performer's sex often remains a relatively constant and uncontested ground. It is not that the sexed body determines the gender of the performer – which is precisely the point that drag refutes most forcefully – but that the performer's 'essential' self is constituted by gender rather than sex. For this point to be made, the drag queen must first reveal (and gain the audience's belief in) his actual biological and anatomical sex.

Bette Davis's drag is, like drag itself, an act of defiance, an act which defies the social taboos which enforce sexual difference. This is precisely because her (blatantly artificial) femininity throughout *Mr. Skeffington* clearly does not correspond to her own gender identity, to the essentially androgynous gender identity which her previous screen roles and studio publicity had established for her by 1944. Moreover, the implication of this is that Bette Davis's gender identity is not feminine at all and, as such, her gender is not the expression of her

sex (her anatomical or biological femaleness). Whilst I think it would be too much to claim that in *Mr. Skeffington* Davis presents a knowing critique of the social construction of gender, one might argue that this may well be an incidental effect, a consequence of Davis's determination to perform her role of Fanny Skeffington as though she were a man. Perhaps with more certainty we can assume that Davis, in *Mr. Skeffington*, was defining herself against the conventions of female gender identity – femininity – either because she herself could not conform to the model or because, in 1944, those conventions seemed out-dated within the social context of wartime. If it was, indeed, the latter then we could also assume that her female fans in 1944 would, sharing such an attitude themselves, be in a better position than modern-day audiences to understand and appreciate Davis's extraordinary (and contradictory) version of femininity.

This last point is really rather important because it suggests that the recognition (the reading) of Davis's drag is not merely determined by a modern-day concern and theoretical conceptualization of either gender or drag. Rather, I would suggest, Davis's drag was easily recognizable (readable) for audiences in 1944 since it belonged to a particular historical context in which various social and ideological upheavals brought the whole issue of gender and sex roles glaringly into focus, questioning some of the most firmly held and deep-rooted convictions. The wartime context of *Mr. Skeffington*'s production and consumption suggests a certain knowingness on the part of the audience in terms of gender and its social construction. Thus, the double meanings inherent in Davis's characterization of Fanny Skeffington would most likely have been more meaningful to audiences in 1944 than for succeeding generations of filmgoers. The recent theoretical debates on gender and drag may only now be bringing to light the significance of Davis's performance for academics such as myself, but it does not necessarily follow that such meanings were always previously obscure.

Personally, I would argue against the notion that the recognition of Bette Davis's gender ambiguities is merely the inevitable consequence of recent gender theory and a modern-day preoccupation with drag or masquerade. Such a view, in my opinion, misses an essential point. For if one bears in mind that World War II occasioned one of the first serious challenges to an orthodoxy of patriarchal gender roles, specifically in relation to femininity and womanhood, then it is conceivable that Davis's performance of femininity would have been understood as precisely that – a performance. Moreover, it would have been a performance which many of Davis's audience of (predominantly) US and British women would readily perceive and identify with due to their own experiences of having to reconcile wartime demands (namely, their assumption of male roles in the absence of the men stationed with the armed forces overseas) with their own femininity and femaleness. Having adopted 'male roles' and

assumed a degree of masculinity in the process, women during the war must have been acutely aware of (or sympathetic to) Davis's desire to perform femininity in much the way that a man would do if, having learnt to be masculine, he was suddenly asked to be feminine. The result would be not only an amusing spectacle but an appropriate rejoinder to those demanding that women undergo a similar transformation in order to support the war effort.

Was this the reason for Bette Davis's adoption of an excessive, parodic and caricatured femininity in *Mr. Skeffington*? Obviously this is a question which is not easily answerable. However, one thing is certain and that is, ultimately, that Davis's approach to her role of Fanny Skeffington (and the gap which she established between her own persona and her character) highlighted an androgynous gender identity. This was achieved, moreover, by making herself appear as uncomfortable with her femininity as any male actor would be if required to undertake the role. If this was the point Davis was hoping to make by taking Fanny's femininity to extremes, then she was indeed doing drag rather than masquerade, for the latter would disguise her masculinity rather than display it.

Perhaps in the final analysis, however, the real issue is not whether Davis was doing drag or using femininity-as-a-masquerade but what our understanding of these two concepts reveals about the nature and function of her gender performance. If we accept that drag and masquerade provide two possibilities for the performance of femininity, the former exposing and the latter disguising an inherent masculinity, then what possible conclusions might we draw from Davis's characterization of Fanny Skeffington? If one examines *Mr. Skeffington* in relation to masquerade the most obvious conclusion is that Bette Davis used an excess of femininity onscreen to disguise the authority which she exercised behind the cameras (which made her seem masculine). The concept of masquerade suggests, moreover, that she did this because she feared the retribution of her male peers and superiors within the film industry for having assumed a male role. This would mean that her actions were almost exactly those of the women described by Joan Riviere in 'Womanliness as masquerade'. However, in light of the roles which Davis went on to perform in her subsequent movies, particularly that of Miss Moffat in *The Corn is Green* the following year, the suggestion that the actress was using masquerade to disguise her masculinity seems rather unlikely.

Understanding Davis's performance in terms of drag offers, I believe, a more convincing interpretation: the possibility of recognizing in Davis's performance her contempt for what in 1944 must surely have seemed an outdated concept of femininity and womanhood. It also suggests an act of defiance by Davis (entirely in keeping with her star persona), this time directed not at the film industry itself but at the whole notion of femininity as the natural expression of the female sex. But drag also allows us to see in Davis's

approach to her role an ambivalence towards femininity, an irreconcilable conflict between her rejection of conventional femininity and her desire to achieve feminine perfection. In much the same way that male drag queens (gay and straight) often simultaneously mock and revere femininity, we can see in *Mr. Skeffington* femininity held up to ridicule and, equally, the desire to attain the feminine ideal. If Davis succeeds in expressing her contempt for conventional ideals of femininity (particularly those of the early twentieth century) she also indicates something of her own frustration at having failed to obtain them. Thus, although we can laugh at Davis's attempts at femininity (as she surely requires us to do), we are also occasionally unsettled by the tragedy of her all too obvious failure to represent a convincing portrait of a feminine woman. In actual fact, *Mr. Skeffington* is a rather curious mixture of comedy and melodrama and, as such, it is sometimes difficult for the viewer to judge the most appropriate response to the events portrayed, whether to laugh or cry. As a result, at certain points in the narrative one could just as easily be amused by Davis's 'sending up' of Fanny's vanity or be moved by Davis's discomfort and failure to measure up to the standard of femininity demanded by her role.

Of these two forms of gender performance, drag would seem to provide the most telling insights into Bette Davis's construction of an ambiguous gender identity in her 1944 movie. However, although it is tempting to assert that Davis's performance of femininity in *Mr. Skeffington* is essentially that of drag rather than masquerade, such a conclusion might well be considered highly problematic. For, of course, drag (and in this case, more specifically, female impersonation) is more typically associated with male performers disguised as (or imitating) women. Drag must, therefore, seem inappropriate here simply because Davis is not a man impersonating a woman. It is, on the other hand, masquerade which has come to designate a woman's attempt at female impersonation and would seem to best describe and account for Bette Davis's excessively feminine portrayal of Fanny Skeffington. Yet the concept of masquerade explains neither the motivation behind nor the effect of Davis's performance of femininity in *Mr. Skeffington*. This is precisely because masquerade is essentially a defensive mechanism whereas Bette Davis seems rather to be on the offensive in her 1944 film. Therefore, if we are to describe her performance of femininity as masquerade we must first reconceive this as a more subversive and aggressive concept than Riviere originally intended. The term 'masquerade' would then designate a form of gender performance which shares with drag many of the latter's more challenging aspects. However, such a reconceptualization of masquerade would seem rather questionable given that it would eliminate not only the unconscious processes which it was originally intended to explain, but also the dimension of women's social powerlessness implicit in the act of

disguising masculinity for fear of male retribution.

Ultimately, because drag seems an inappropriate term to use in relation to a female performer performing femininity, and because masquerade fails to account for the more offensive and (consciously) subversive aspects of some acts of female-female impersonation (including Davis's), we have the option of either introducing a hybrid concept ('drasquerade') or of using both masquerade and drag to interpret aspects of a single performance. Of course, when used in conjunction, masquerade and drag offer conflicting readings (of meanings and motivations) which hardly make for a conclusive interpretation or analysis. And yet, seen in another light, masquerade and drag offer the possibility of establishing an ambivalent reading of a single film (or a single act). As two distinct concepts, masquerade and drag allow us to read a film like *Mr. Skeffington* in different (even contradictory) ways. The advantage of this is precisely that by employing both concepts we can leave room for ambivalence in our reading of Bette Davis's performance of femininity and, in so doing, preserve the ambiguity of her gender identity. On the whole, there seems little reason to foreclose the possibility of Davis's performance being both masquerade and drag. By resisting the temptation to reject one of these concepts in favour of the other, there is always the possibility of revealing an interplay of contradictory meanings and motivations at work. But, more importantly, as long as the issue of masquerade or drag remains unresolved, we can avail ourselves of one of the virtues of analysing the ambiguous: that of deciding for ourselves, and leaving others to arrive at their own conclusions.

'Putting on the Ritz': masculinity and the young Gary Cooper

JEFFREY A. BROWN

In a career encompassing ninety-two feature films, from *The Winning of Barbara Worth* (Henry King, 1926) to *The Naked Edge* (Michael Anderson, 1961), two Academy Awards for 'Best Actor' and one for his 'special contribution to the movies', Gary Cooper embodied Hollywood's ideal of the strong, silent North American man.

Retrospectively, Cooper's film roles, interviews, the publicity about his 'private' life and rumours of his sexual liaisons can be read to constitute a sexualized masculine ideal. Looking at the construction of Cooper's star image during the late twenties and early thirties we can begin to question the particular type of masculinity he represented. Cooper's image and, subsequently, the role which that image has assumed in US culture, reveal the denied narcissism inherent in the cinema's portrayal of rugged masculinity. The heroic, yet often feminized, image of Gary Cooper has both influenced and reflected the nature of male presentation. As Hollywood was making the transition from the silents to talkies, Cooper was seen as the likely heir to both the romantic Valentino and the rugged William S. Hart. That Cooper managed successfully to reconcile such apparently disparate archetypes within his own early star image indicates that the *soft* masculinity of the 'pretty-boy' and the *hard* masculinity of the 'he-man' may be mutually dependent features in US cinema. This masquerade of masculinity reveals alternate means and pleasures of voyeuristic identification for male viewers based on the combinatory nature of contemporary male sexuality that both solicits and denies an erotic gaze.

¹ Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as spectacle: reflections on men and mainstream cinema', *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1983), p. 14.

In his article 'Masculinity as spectacle', Steve Neale argues that efforts to refuse the homoerotic implication of looking allow that the eroticized male body may only be displayed for the (male) spectator's gaze via spectacles of physical conflict, such as Western shoot-outs or Roman gladiatorial combats. Neale believes that in classical film 'there is no cultural or cinematic convention which would allow the male body to be presented in the way that Dietrich so often is in Sternberg's films'.¹ Yet Neale's mention of Sternberg's fetishization of Dietrich in films like *Morocco* (1930), which costarred and similarly fetishized Cooper, and Neale's admission that 'more direct displays of the male body can be found . . . including the extraordinary shot of Gary Cooper lying under the hut toward the end of *Man of the West*, his body momentarily filling the CinemaScope screen', suggests an alternative eroticization of the male body exemplified by Cooper. Cooper's combination of 'feminine' good looks with 'masculine' roles, makes apparent how even the most rugged of cinematic males were also narcissistically constructed gender representations. That critics like Neale and Mulvey fail to see within specific films the erotic fetishization of males may be because it functions not at a singular textual level but accumulatively. While classical Hollywood did not dwell on the *body* of the hero in the same way that it did of the heroine, it did take an excessive delight in dressing that body up. It is no coincidence that the most traditionally masculine genres necessitate excessively macho costumes. The Western and war genres, in particular, require actors to be cloaked in obvious masculine accoutrements. The ambiguous spectacle that was Gary Cooper – a pretty cowboy – demonstrates cinema's, and, by extension, western culture's, practice of encoding masculinity through fetishistically masculine roles.

² Richard Dyer, 'Don't look now: the male pin-up', *Screen*, vol. 23, nos 3–4 (1982), pp. 61–73.

In his discussion of the male pin-up, Richard Dyer has argued that images of men which designate the body as an object 'to be looked at' place the male model in a feminine position.² By feminizing the male as an object, such images compromise the heterosexuality of the models. Thus, explicitly erotic images of men, such as those found in *Playgirl*, are not simple substitutions of the male object for the female, because the photographs must work to disguise the homosexual implications of men who invite the gaze by associating them with traditional signifiers of heterosexual masculinity. Dyer emphasizes the photographic conventions of associating the male pin-up with the masculine traits of sports and work, and their 'naturalized' signification in the model's muscles. He also alludes to the material props of manly occupations – police or fireman garb – often used in the photographs. In the same context we might be able to place Cooper's early film roles. Cooper's screen presence as an object to be looked at was consistently recovered by his appearances as both cowboy and soldier. In fact, his strong association with both of these masculine character types insulated him from the more obviously

feminized roles he played in high-society comedies like *Design for Living* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1933).

Both Neale's and Dyer's explorations of eroticized male bodies are premised on a stable male/female gender binary. This binary is based on a heterosexual assumption of desire associated with 'looking'. Neale and Dyer both assume that men's looking and women's being-looked-at is an exclusive dynamic in a heterosexual culture. The dynamics of this binary, and the heterosexist assumption underlying the terms 'feminine' and 'masculine', has been brought into question by recent feminist and gay critics. In the preface to her groundbreaking work on 'gender as performance', *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler asks, 'what happens to the subject and to the stability of gender categories when the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality is unmasked as that which produces and reifies these ostensible categories of ontology'?³ Thus, Neale's argument that when Rock Hudson is 'presented quite explicitly as the object of an erotic look . . . Hudson's body is *feminized*' because 'only women can function as the objects of an explicitly erotic gaze' seems circular.⁴ Rather than allowing for practices of looking that would challenge Mulvey's model of active/male and passive/female, Neale assumes that any male displayed explicitly as an object to be looked at becomes feminine. In this paper I will be using the terms 'feminine' and 'masculine' in the way I believe Neale and Dyer meant them: not as gender absolutes but as socially constructed and performative concepts. In this way, Cooper's image transcended the binary restrictions of male and female, illustrating how the associated traits of both categories are not mutually exclusive. I am not arguing that Cooper was some sort of androgynous she-man, but that he is an example of the inherent fusing of gender traits that are usually assumed to be sex specific.

This paradoxical problem of masculinity that Cooper represented is well illustrated by the character of Joe Buck (Jon Voight) in *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969). Early on in the film, while Buck is en route to New York to become a gigolo, he hears a woman on a radio call-in show declare that 'Gary Cooper is the ideal man'. It is this image of Cooper, the all-American cowboy as romantic ideal, that frames and informs Buck's naive narcissism. Later, in his New York hotel room, dressed in cowboy boots, tassled leather jacket, and black stetson, we repeatedly see Buck admiring himself in the mirror. He spins and poses, practices smiling, and flexes his shirtless body appraisingly. In short, *Midnight Cowboy* exposes through the exaggerated role of Joe Buck how Hollywood images of men have linked macho characters such as the cowboy with an erotic identification. Cooper's value as an erotic ideal, as both the subject and the object of the cinematic gaze, exemplifies some of the complex ways that (heterosexual) masculinity has been coded.

3 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. viii.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

Trying hard to look like Gary Cooper

After arriving in Los Angeles on Thanksgiving Day 1924, Cooper spent two years as an extra at Poverty Row, where he was one of the nameless background cowboys in the films of Tom Mix and William S. Hart, and even Valentino's *The Eagle* (Clarence Brown, 1925).⁵ Eventually, either Henry King or Samuel Goldwyn (who both took credit for discovering Cooper) promoted Cooper to a starring role as Abe Lee in *The Winning of Barbara Worth* when the actor who was supposed to play the part failed to report to the studio. Cooper's performance was the surprise success of the film, garnering much critical attention and an overwhelming amount of mail from female viewers. Almost instantly, Cooper's public image began to take shape around the twin poles of physical attractiveness and rugged masculinity. Cooper himself seems to have been aware of his two most likely avenues of success since in the first publicity photographs he commissioned, some featured him 'in Western garb, others in the Valentino style'.⁶ The fan magazines that helped to construct Cooper's early image often sought to reconcile these two sides. The first feature article on Cooper, in a 1927 issue of *Photoplay*, introduces him with the description: 'He comes from the West. There is a breath of sage, of sand, of the spaces about him. Long limbs, tumbled black locks, keen blue eyes, a twisted smile.'⁷ This combined description of Cooper's good looks and Western origin permeates the entire article, which is ostensibly about his upcoming role in *Children of Divorce* (Frank Lloyd, 1927) with Clara Bow. He is the new kid 'making slam-bang Westerns' who captivates women because 'his lashes flare back from his blue eyes like curved exclamation points'.⁸

⁵ Informative biographies of Cooper include: Homer Dickens, *The Films of Gary Cooper* (New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1970); Larry Swindell, *The Last Hero: a Biography of Gary Cooper* (New York: Doubleday, 1980); Jane Ellen Wayne, *Cooper's Women* (Toronto: Prentice Hall, 1988).

⁶ Stephen Tatum, 'The classic Westerner: Gary Cooper', in Archie P. McDonald (ed.), *Shooting Stars: Heroes and Heroines of Western Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

⁷ Dorothy Spensley, 'Suffering to stardom: one poignant scene, one heart-rending moment, and Gary Cooper was there', *Photoplay*, vol. 31 (1927), p. 75.

⁸ Ibid., p. 125.

⁹ Dorothy Manners, 'That cow-punchin' Cinderella man', *Motion Picture Classic*, vol. 25 (1927), p. 54.

Two months later, in June 1927, *Motion Picture Classic* introduced Cooper in a similar article entitled 'That Cow-Punchin' Cinderella Man', again associating Cooper with both feminine and masculine traits. The article likens Cooper to a typical Hollywood ingenue – 'cute, blonde and sixteen',⁹ yet also describes him as a natural Westerner from the American wilds. Typically, the accompanying illustrations include a photograph of Cooper in Western garb, and one of him in a finely tailored suit holding a poodle. *Motion Picture Classic* also mentions Cooper's popularity with male audiences for his role as the heroic cowboy in *Barbara Worth*, and his popularity with women, who flooded the studio with the most fan mail since Valentino's premiere. The article implies that the Hollywood neophyte will soon have to choose between playing a cowboy or a ladies' man. But Cooper never did have to choose. While most stars from cinema's classic era were linked to a specific genre – Fairbanks the swashbuckler, Cagney the gangster, Astaire the dancer – Cooper was a success across genres. His complex image allowed him to seem equally at home in the drawing room, in the cockpit of a World War I bi-plane, in small-town America, or on the Western frontier.

¹⁰ Quoted in Wayne, *Cooper's Women*, p. 16.

Both the articles from *Photoplay* and *Motion Picture Classic*, as well as other smaller features over the next year and a half, link Cooper's screen success with his romantic liaisons. It was no secret around Hollywood that many of Cooper's big breaks after *The Winning of Barbara Worth* were due to his servicing of Clara Bow. She was one of the biggest stars of the time and, by all accounts, also one of Hollywood's most insatiable vixens. Bow was just reaching the height of her stardom when she met Cooper at a studio party. They immediately hit it off and, according to one biographer, Bow declared that 'the stunning Montana cowboy was a champion in bed and could even outlast her'.¹⁰ Cooper's reputation as a gigolo willing to sleep his way to the top was confirmed when Bow insisted he be rewarded with roles in her movies. Cooper's small part in Bow's film *It* (Clarence Badger, 1927) earned him the demeaning nickname of the 'It' boy, but his short cameo in her *Wings* (William A. Wellman, 1927) garnered rave reviews and established Cooper as a screen favourite. Yet despite the popularity Cooper had earned on screen, the stigma of Cooper 'owing' his success to more powerful women (and men, according to some rumours) would haunt him for years. After Bow, Cooper's legendary affairs with his leading ladies, most of whom were bigger stars than he, only compounded his reputation as a 'woman-made man'.

¹¹ Gaylyn Studlar, 'Valentino, "optic intoxication", and dance madness', in Steven Cohan and Inna Rae Hark (eds), *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

¹² J. Wiley, *Triumph* (New York: Minton, Balch and Co., 1926). Quoted in Studlar, 'Valentino', p. 27.

¹³ Dorothy Goldbeck, 'You can't trust women: Gary Cooper exhibits his shattered illusions', *Motion Picture Classic*, vol. 28 (February, 1929), p. 43.

The cultural fear in the 1920s of the emasculated woman-made man is well documented by Gaylyn Studlar in his essay 'Valentino, "optic intoxication"', and dance madness'.¹¹ The association Studlar makes between Valentino and the fashion of 'tango teas', where Latin men were hired to dance with rich women, points to the same type of criticism to which Cooper was susceptible. His well publicized affairs made Cooper an example of that new trend of 'young men of extremely good looks . . . [who are adopted by women] for amusement much as kings in olden times attached jesters to their persons'.¹² While Valentino, with his exotic Latin background and association with the tango, was unable to transcend his primary image as a sexual commodity, Cooper's emphasised North American heritage and his early association with the Western genre allowed him to absorb the negative press that implied his success was due to female sponsors. Whether by luck or design, Cooper did seek to distance himself from the emasculated image of the woman-made man that threatened to undermine his credibility as a rugged hero. At the same time as Clara Bow's legal battle with an ex-housekeeper made public the sordid details of Bow's sex life – including orgies, a gang bang with the UCLA football team, and sensational descriptions of Cooper as Bow's 'sex toy' – *Motion Picture Classic* ran a feature article on Cooper entitled 'You can't trust women: Gary Cooper exhibits his shattered illusions'.¹³ Cooper claimed that he was used by all the women he had been associated with in Hollywood and never had any but the most honourable intentions. He declared that women were natural liars and

that from then on he would hold out for the ideal lady to be his wife. Whereas Valentino would defend his image from male criticism by claiming American men did not know how to treat women, Cooper aligned himself with predominant misogynistic views and reconciled the two sides of his image.

After his emergence in *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, Cooper starred in fourteen features for Paramount in just two years. Cooper's popularity grew steadily with both male and female audiences as he played everything from the usual cowboy and fighter pilot heros to a farmer, *Doomsday* (Rowland V. Lee, 1928), a fisherman, *The First Kiss* (Rowland V. Lee, 1928), and a Viennese artist, *Betrayal* (Lewis Milestone, 1929). His acting abilities were admired by some as a marvel of underacting, while others, like Emil Jannings, openly criticized Cooper as being nothing more than a 'pretty boy'.

Regardless of his skill as a thespian or the overly melodramatic plots, Cooper's films were consistently profitable at the box office. In these two hectic years, Cooper went from a nameless extra working on Poverty Row to a leading man at Hollywood's largest studio.

The cowboy

Any doubts about the quality of Cooper's acting were put to rest by the smash hit of 1929, *The Virginian* (Victor Fleming). The film catapulted Cooper into the elite ranks of stardom and solidified his association with the Western. *The Virginian* also provides an excellent example of how Cooper's image as a sexual commodity is apparent in a masculine genre. In 1929 the popularity of the Western genre was in decline, so, to ensure the success of their first all-talking Western, Paramount chose Cooper to capitalize on his popularity with women as the new male idol from romantic pictures like *Doomsday*, *Half a Bride* (Gregory La Cava, 1928) and *Lilac Time* (George Fitzmaurice, 1928), and with men familiar with his recent work in lesser Westerns such as *Nevada* (John Waters, 1927), *The Last Outlaw* (Arthur Rosson, 1927), and *Wolf Song* (Victor Fleming, 1929). Even the promotional poster distributed by Paramount was rather unusual for a Western in that the dominant image of Cooper is an extremely tight closeup featuring what could only be called soulful eyes and pouty lips.

Cooper's quintessential performance as the Virginian, and his later roles in such notable Westerns as *The Plainsman* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1936) and *The Westerner* (William Wyler, 1940), made him the model for Robert Warshow's often cited definition of the classic Western hero in his 1954 essay 'Movie chronicle: the Westerner'.¹⁴ The Virginian personifies the archetypal hero described by Warshow and subsequent critics such as Kitses, Wright, and Cawelti. The film positions Cooper's character as the frontier mediator between savagery

¹⁴ Robert Warshow, 'Movie chronicle: the Westerner', in *The Immediate Experience* (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

The soulful eyes and pouty lips
of Cooper in *The Virginian*
(Victor Fleming, 1929)



and civilization. We are first introduced to the Virginian (the character's real name is never given) as he enters town, the foreman of a cattle drive for the Box H ranch. He meets his old friend Steve and offers him a job, and shortly after this they both meet and begin to vie for the affections of the new school teacher from back East, Molly Wood. The Virginian is shown as superior to Steve in common sense and Western skills, and his gentlemanliness is contrasted to the boorish behaviour of Trampas, the black-hatted villain, when they quarrel over the treatment of a saloon girl. Still, the Virginian is established as an outsider to the community; he plays childish pranks at a church social and is shown as uncomfortable around the better-educated town folk. The Virginian confesses his love to Molly and warns Steve not to get involved with cattle rustling. But Steve falls in with Trampas's gang, and the Virginian is compelled to lead a posse which captures and hangs Steve and two other rustlers. This is one of the most dramatic moments in the film, as the Virginian is

forced to choose between his loyalty to a friend and his moral code of socially responsible action. His refusal to free Steve almost loses him Molly's love, but when she nurses him back to health after he is wounded by Trampas she realizes his innate goodness and agrees to marry him. On their wedding day Trampas orders the Virginian out of town so, ignoring Molly's objections, he stalks Trampas through town and kills him, leaving the town restored, and avenging Steve's death. Thus, the Virginian ushers in the New West, where the streets are safer for decent folk and civilization replaces lawlessness.

The formulaic plot of *The Virginian* aligns Cooper's hero with the good and decent members of the community. The 'good' of the community, embodied by Molly Wood, becomes associated with the Virginian, and is narratively and cinematically juxtaposed with the 'bad' of Trampas's posse of villains. The now cliched convention of using white and black cowboy hats to differentiate between the two dominates the film. To underline his affiliation to Molly, the Virginian is filmed in much the same way as she is. Unlike the unflattering shots we see of the harshly masculine Trampas, Cooper is filmed in soft focus, in warm daylight scenes, and in careful pans that accentuate his lanky body in the saddle. The final shoot-out follows the Virginian as he chases Trampas through the town, carefully giving us glimpses of Cooper running after his quarry and lurking around corners. Unlike the parodically excessive shoot-outs Neale describes from Eastwood's spaghetti Westerns, the scene in *The Virginian* does not restrict the audience's gaze to segmented parts of the male body but presents it in full combat 'glory'.

Cooper's role in *The Virginian*, and almost every Western role he played subsequently, confuses the notion of two distinctly divergent images of masculinity at work in the Western that Mulvey outlines in 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema inspired by *Duel in the Sun*'. Comparing the Western formula with the Proppian folk tale, Mulvey writes:

The tension between two points of attraction, the symbolic (social integration and marriage) and nostalgic narcissism, generates a common splitting of the Western hero into two, something unknown in the Proppian tale. Here two functions emerge, one celebrating integration into society through marriage, and the other celebrating resistance to social standards and responsibilities, above all those of marriage and the family, the sphere represented by women.¹⁵

For many Western films, particularly those featuring more two-dimensional cowboy stars like John Wayne, Mulvey's distinction is accurate. But in Cooper's films we see the cowboy who marries the girl, thus entering the sphere of the feminine but never completely acquiescing to the community. More often than not, he keeps his guns, riding into the sunset with the woman by his side. This combination of accepting the wife and rejecting the community is taken to an extreme

¹⁵ Laura Mulvey, 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema inspired by *Duel in the Sun*', *Framework*, nos. 15–17 (1981), p. 18.

in Cooper's *High Noon* (Fred Zinnemann, 1952). Rather than splitting the functions into two, Cooper united them as one.

Martin Pumphrey has recently argued that since Westerns are so heavily coded in gendered terms, with civilization being associated with feminine and wilderness with masculine, all Western heroes occupy, to some extent, an ambiguous position. As Pumphrey puts it:

the attempt to mask the anti-social dimensions of male toughness became the source of the genre's most familiar moments – the refusal to draw first, the kindness to the weak, the glass of milk or soda pop in the bar. What those moments reveal, of course, is that the ideal of masculinity Westerns offer in their heroes is fundamentally contradictory. Heroes must be *both* dominant and deferential, gentle and violent, self-contained and sensitive, practical and idealist, individualist and conformist, rational and intuitive, peace-loving but ready to fight without quitting at a moment's notice. Quite simply, the hero's masculine toughness must be partially feminised.¹⁶

¹⁶ Martin Pumphrey, 'Why do cowboys wear hats in the bath? Style politics and the older man', *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 31, no. 3 (1992), p. 82.

Pumphrey's insights about the heroic nature of Westerns is apt and well demonstrated by Cooper as the Virginian. But the feminization of Cooper's masculinity in this film goes beyond the narrative conventions utilized to separate the hero from both villain and community. As with the poster's feminized image, the film often seems to exploit Cooper, on a technical level, as an object to be looked at.

The feminizing objectification of Cooper in Westerns had occurred before *The Virginian*. Just six months previously, Cooper had become the first cowboy star to appear in a nude scene. Although his skinny-dipping in *Wolf Song* with Lupe Velez (with whom he was having one of his usual torrid love affairs) was eventually reduced to an extremely distant shot, it did clearly mark an attempt to attract a female audience by exploiting Cooper's sex idol status. In *The Virginian* Cooper is repeatedly filmed in 'soft focus' closeups while his downturned eyes dart about almost coquettishly. These shots come at times when the Virginian is confused, helpless or vulnerable – when he confesses his love for Molly, or imagines he hears Steve's whistle after the hanging. The image of vulnerability Cooper was able to express while dressed in rugged cowboy gear became his unique trademark, and provided a sense of depth to his Western roles that was unmatched by other actors. Cooper was able to convey the powerful masculinity necessary for Westerns via the narrative and his natural style in the saddle, but the softened, more questioning, more vulnerable persona created by simultaneously filming him as a sexually desirable object – without the excessively masculine veils of combat scenes – made him a complex Western hero. This association of Cooper with a vulnerable Western hero made him the only possible choice for the role of Will Kane in the revisionist *High Noon*.

As the objectifying soft focus shots often employed in his Westerns were established, Cooper was not exempt from lingering, voyeuristic shots that focused on the attractiveness of his body. As Willemen and Neale state explicitly, male bodies, particularly in genres like the Western, are never viewed directly but are always seen ‘in action’, typically in combat. Yet in *The Virginian*, and more obviously a year later in *The Texan* (John Cromwell, 1930), Cooper can be seen lounging in a chair, leaning against a wall, or just lying around doing nothing, while the camera lingers on the spectacle of his body clothed in overtly masculine costumes. In *The Texan*, Cooper plays Enrique, the Llano Kid, who swaggered around in tight toreador pants, a flowing scarf and a low slung gun belt. Even in later Westerns Cooper was portrayed in this direct way, such as in the opening shot from *Man of the West* (Anthony Mann, 1958) mentioned by Neale. The only comparable shot I can think of featuring a classic Western star, is the introductory shot of John Wayne as the Cisco Kid in *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939). Interestingly, the Cisco Kid was a role originally modeled for Cooper, but he turned it down on the advice of his wife, thus clearing the way for Wayne to escape the B Westerns.

The soldier

In the early years of his career, Cooper’s success in Westerns was closely rivalled by his success in war films. In fact, by the time of *The Virginian*, Cooper was as well known as a fly-boy (from movies like *Wings*, *Legion of the Condemned* [William Wellman, 1928] and *Lilac Time*) as he was for Westerns. After his stardom was solidified by *The Virginian*, Cooper spent most of the early 1930s in a soldier’s uniform of one type or another. By the time the smash hit *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (Henry Hathaway) was released in 1935, Cooper’s association with soldier roles was strong enough to be part of the promotional campaign. Paramount ran a full page advertisement/article in a 1935 issue of *Photoplay Magazine* entitled ‘Gary Cooper, fighting man of all nations!’. As the advertisement boasts:

He has worn the uniforms of a half-dozen nations and twice that many branches of the various services. He has carried every known form of war weapon from a six-gun to a cavalry lance. He has soldiered in the Sahara, the trenches of France, the mountains of Italy and on the battlefields of our own Civil War. He has fought hand-to-hand, in the air and astride a horse. That’s the unique record of filmdom’s best-beloved portrayer of warlike roles – Gary Cooper.¹⁷

Indeed, as the advertisement indicates, in spite of Cooper’s overwhelmingly American persona he was as likely as not cast as a foreign soldier. Whether playing the Parisian Major Henri de

¹⁷ James A. Daniels, ‘Gary Cooper, fighting man of all nations’, *Photoplay*, vol. 47 (February, 1935), p. 25.

Beaujolais of the French Foreign Legion in *Beau Sabreur* (John Waters, 1928), English Captain Philip Blythe of the Royal Air Corps in *Lilac Time*, or a 'Scotch-Canadian' officer in both *Seven Days Leave* (Richard Wallace, 1930) and *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, Cooper remained a North American ideal. That despite his uncompensated Americanness, or perhaps because of it, he was 'filmdom's best-loved portrayer of warlike roles' indicates the colonializing effect of classical Hollywood films. As regards to this article, though, Cooper's soldier roles are an example of his erotically fetishized mask of masculinity. Cooper was forever dressed up in an officer's uniform of one sort or another, giving him a chance to model flattering masculine costumes without appearing vain.

Perhaps the most obvious example of Cooper's objectified masculinity is his role as French Foreign Legionnaire Tom Brown in *Morocco* (Josef von Sternberg, 1930). Although the film is primarily remembered as the first US vehicle for Marlene Dietrich, at this time Cooper was one of the biggest stars in Hollywood and ranked above Dietrich in the credits. Cooper's cachet with Paramount was strong enough to get away with throttling Sternberg and yelling at him to speak English when he rightly assumed that Sternberg was insulting him in German. Regardless of the antagonism between Cooper and Sternberg on the set, Cooper and Dietrich got along famously: they openly flirted, laughed together about Sternberg's tirades, and were rumoured to be lovers. Cooper's and Dietrich's barely concealed passion for each other, despite Sternberg's jealous presence, helped make their scenes thick with erotic tension. Dietrich plays Amy Jolly, who arrives in Morocco after a failed love affair to take a job as a cabaret singer. She falls for Tom Brown, a notorious lothario, who is subsequently assigned to a dangerous mission by his jealous commander whose wife is in love with Brown. Jolly is meanwhile being pursued by the wealthy Kennington (Adolphe Menjou) who proposes to her while Brown is listening outside her dressing-room door. Brown does what he feels is the gentlemanly thing and leaves her so that she can be with the more secure Kennington. Brown survives the mission, and Jolly, unable to overcome her feelings for him, tracks him to a local dive and discovers he loves her too. The next day, in one of the most unlikely finales ever, Jolly leaves Kennington to follow Brown's troop into the desert.

Although much of *Morocco* deals with the sometimes ambiguous gender negotiations of Dietrich's character, Jolly, it also constructs Cooper's Brown as a peculiarly sexual character. The first scene introduces Brown as his patrol returns from the desert and several women single him out from the other Legionnaires to leer at him. After being dismissed, Brown strikes a casual pose leaning on his gun while a Moroccan girl on a nearby balcony brazenly lifts her veil to smile invitingly at him. Cooper's desirability within the film is enhanced in the famous cabaret scene, even before Jolly takes the

Cooper's feminized Brown
complementing Dietrich's
masculinized Jolly - *Morocco*
(Josef von Sternberg, 1930)



stage. Here all types of women vie for Brown's attention, from the Captain's wife to a Gypsy-type local, and later, Jolly herself, who looks at him just as directly and appraisingly as he looks at her. As befits the complex mise-en-scene for which Sternberg was famous, Cooper is objectified in ways normally reserved for women. Thus we get the feminized images of Cooper in full Legionnaire's uniform with a flower tucked behind his ear, and Cooper lounging rather effeminately with a fan in Jolly's apartment.

If, as many critics have argued, Dietrich's Jolly is significant because she presents an erotically charged, masculinized/fetishized female then, conversely, Cooper's Brown must present an erotically charged, feminized/fetishized male. The complementary characteristics of Brown and Jolly are what necessitate their union by the film's end.

James Naremore succinctly describes the dual gender reversals of Cooper and Dietrich:

[Dietrich] is paralleled in important ways with Cooper, who will not only become her lover but her soul mate: Both Amy and Tom Brown are ‘foreign legionnaires’, equally arrogant and cynical, their behaviour and postures almost identical at certain points in the film. During this early scene [the cabaret], Sternberg makes them seem like two sides of the same coin, comparing their actions and subtly confusing their sexual identities. Dietrich dresses and behaves like a man, whereas Cooper will take a flower offered by Dietrich during the song and wear it behind his ear, ultimately flirting with her from behind a lady’s fan like the one she has tossed aside in the dressing room. As Sarris has noted, the film is in some ways more audacious for the way it ‘feminizes’ Cooper than for the way it ‘masculinizes’ Dietrich, and one could hardly say which of the two is more erotically costumed or more exhibitionistically posed for the camera.¹⁸

¹⁸ James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988).

Morocco was a rather unusually stylistic commercial and critical success. That US audiences were not alarmed by the obviously fetishized depiction of Cooper was due to his already established image as tough guy and male pin-up. Thus, he was able to acceptably portray Brown as both a sexual object of the cinematic gaze and as an accomplished heterosexual, rugged enough to control the unruly crowd at the cabaret and to survive deadly assignments when lesser men failed.

Less obvious, but really no less directly voyeuristic, was Cooper’s next major war film, *A Farewell to Arms* (Frank Borzage, 1932). Adapted from Hemingway’s novel of 1930, and costarring Helen Hayes and Adolphe Menjou, *A Farewell to Arms* was another huge success for Cooper and garnered four Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture. Reviewers were pleasantly surprised by the emotional depth of Cooper as a love-struck young ambulance driver in World War I. Through most of the picture, Cooper is filmed as a dashing figure in the uniform of the Italian army, but two early scenes are notable for showing him without his shirt. In both instances Cooper’s state of undress is ostensibly because he is changing, but there is a marked lack of urgency in putting the shirt back on. Likewise, in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* the longest unbroken scene occurs after Cooper has stripped to the waist for shaving. For a full six minutes Cooper walks around shirtless, talking to Richard Cromwell who is in the bath, and arguing with Franchot Tone about his annoying flute-playing. The scene finally ends when a still bare-chested Cooper shoots an erect snake that has been attracted by Tone’s flute music. As Neale points out, in male genres combat creates the most common excuse for disrobing and displaying the masculine body. This more traditional exposure of the body can be

Homoerotic bonding in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* (Henry Hathaway, 1935)



found in early Cooper films such as the fight scene in *The Spoilers* (Edward Corewe, 1930) where William Boyd manages to get all but one sleeve of Cooper's shirt off. It was just as common for Cooper's chest to be bared for more directly exploitative effect, as when his undershirt is torn to shreds after a shipwreck in *Half A Bride*. Cooper's combinatory image as pin-up and macho hero allowed his display to be relatively less mediated by 'masculine combat' than other screen heroes.

The possibly homosocial overtones of the scene described above from *Lives of a Bengal Lancer* brings up the homoerotic bonding commonly ascribed to the war picture. Indeed, a publicity still from the film is comparable to the over-phallicized photograph of Humphrey Bogart that Dyer refers to. Susan Jeffords has remarked, 'the defining feature of American war narratives is that they are a "man's story" from which women are generally excluded'.¹⁹ As such, war narratives run the risk of showing men with no alternative love interests. Thus, women are almost humorously appended to the film as a reward for one of the characters and to provide proper heterosexual evidence. The most obvious example of the superfluous addition of woman to war films is Cooper's *Today We Live* (Howard Hawks, 1933) with Joan Crawford. Based on a short story by William Faulkner which contained no women at all, *Today We Live* uses Crawford as the central narrative device to unite the men in a competition for her love as they each try to impress the other with their daring wartime assignments. The barely displaced homosexual overtone of the film comes to a head when Claude (Robert Young)

¹⁹ Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 49.

and Ronnie (Franchot Tone) look in on a sleeping Crawford before leaving on a suicide mission that will allow her and Cooper to live happily ever after. Claude, who has been blinded by shrapnel, tells his friend to ‘look at her, Ronnie, look at her sleeping while I touch you’. The two men choose to ‘touch’ one another and die together rather than stay with the woman they both love. Ironically, Cooper gets Crawford in the end only because he and his war partner, McGinnis (Roscoe Karns), arrive too late to sacrifice themselves to the same mission.

Notably, in all of Cooper’s war pictures (except *Bengal Lancer*) he is the soldier who gets the girl. In fact, in Cooper’s war movies the action, and the war itself, take a back seat to the love story. The war is inconsequential, so long as Cooper looks good enough in uniform, and sounds heroic enough to win the girl. Cooper’s special ability in the early 1930s was looking the part of a dashing and romantic hero, so much so that he was cast as the cartoonish ‘White Knight’ in the disastrous 1933 version of *Alice in Wonderland* (Norman McLeod). While Cooper’s Westerns appealed to women as well as men by his objectified physical presence, his love stories appealed to men as well as women by disguising themselves as war pictures.

Dressed up like a million dollar trooper

Cooper was known in the early part of his career primarily for his roles as a Westerner, secondly for his war films, and thirdly for his work in ‘light’ or ‘high-society’ comedies. His first high-society role came in the box-office failure *Children of Divorce*. After that miserable experience (where he was fired from the film halfway through for bad acting, rehired when Clara Bow insisted, and almost universally panned for his performance by the critics) Cooper stuck to Westerns and war pictures until his stardom was unquestionable. In 1933 Cooper again donned tuxedo and effeminate mannerisms in *Design for Living* with Fredric March and Miriam Hopkins. The film was an unfortunate disappointment, but Cooper returned to the genre soon after with success in *Now and Forever* (Henry Hathaway, 1934) with Carole Lombard and the unstoppable Shirley Temple, and then again with Marlene Dietrich in the modest hit *Desire* (Frank Borzage, 1936).

Design for Living illustrates the extent to which the subtle feminization of Cooper was more than adequately disguised by his traditionally masculine roles. Based on Noël Coward’s play, the film is about the unusual *ménage à trois* lifestyle of playwright Tom Chambers (March), artist George Curtis (Cooper), and Gilda Farrell (Hopkins), who all meet on a train and fall in love. The three are inseparable until the ‘gentleman’s agreement’ breaks down and Tom and George squabble over Gilda. Upset, Gilda moves to America and

marries her boss Max Plunkett, with whom she quickly becomes bored. A year later Tom and George crash a party at Gilda's new home, Gilda leaves Max and they return to Paris as a happy threesome. The homosexual, or at least bisexual, implications of Coward's story are hard to miss, but there were no complaints from fans about casting Cooper in the rather effeminate role.

Ironically, just prior to the release of *Design for Living*, loud rumours were circulating in Hollywood about the nature of Cooper's 'friendship' with Anderson Lawler. Lawler was a well-known homosexual, and Cooper had long been suspected of sleeping his way into starring roles, with both women and men. The two met in 1929 at Paramount where they were filming separate movies in adjacent studios. They were immediately inseparable and Lawler moved into Cooper's apartment where they lived as roommates whenever Cooper and Lupe Velez were fighting, which was often. Velez later declared, in her trademark broken English, that the reason she and Cooper finally separated was over Lawler's 'loff for Garree'. But the rumours of Cooper's personal life with Lawler, and any doubts that might have been raised by his role in *Design for Living*, were put to rest when his engagement to Veronica Balfe was announced on 13 November 1933, just four days before the film's premiere. Cooper's image as a masculine ideal was so ingrained that it could withstand even outright implications of homoeroticism. As one reviewer put it while explaining the failure of *Design for Living*, 'the trouble with Cooper and March was that they were too masculine for the effete implications of the plot'²⁰. Likewise, Cooper's reputation as a ladies' man offscreen insulated him from the accusations of homosexual liaisons with Lawler and other professed Hollywood gays.

Cooper's marriage in 1933 also helped stave off the 'kept man' rumours that had been dogging him since his days with Clara Bow. After Cooper's self-earned stardom became unquestionable, his legendary affairs with the most sought after women in Hollywood (Carole Lombard, Mary Pickford, Joan Crawford, Fay Wray, Claudette Colbert ...) were undertaken for pleasure rather than self-advancement. But Cooper made the blunder of becoming the 'celebrity gigolo' of the Countess di Frasso. The Countess was an extremely wealthy New York heiress who had bought her title by marrying a bankrupt Italian Count. She spent most of her time and money socializing with the society rich and the Hollywood famous. After filming *I Take This Woman* (Marion Gering, 1931), Cooper went to Europe on his first vacation since his arrival in Los Angeles seven years earlier to recover from the exhausting demands placed on him by Paramount. While in Italy, Cooper lived with the Countess, whom he had previously met at Pickfair. Fourteen years Cooper's senior, she showered him with gifts and held gala balls to introduce him to the European elite. Cooper was flattered by this pampering and, much to Paramount's chagrin, made numerous headlines as the Countess's

²⁰ Quoted in Dickens, *The Films of Gary Cooper*, p. 116.

lover. After repeatedly extending his vacation, Cooper finally agreed to return to Hollywood when Paramount threatened to replace him with their new star Cary Grant. Paramount went so far as to take Cooper off payroll, apparently afraid that all the publicity he was receiving with the Countess as a 'society dandy' was harming his cowboy image.

Cooper returned to Hollywood a changed man. He had assumed an air of sophistication that the press could not help but notice. Upon his return, *Photoplay* remarked that 'Gary has acquired a new and very engaging sophistication. He fences nimbly with words. He makes adroit and audacious *bon mots*. He has – this shy boy from Montana – acquired a little bit of the Continental manner'²¹ Yet, like Cooper's combinatory screen image, this much publicized 'sophistication' was reported as both dandifying and masculinizing. The article is headed 'I'm through being bossed: says Gary Cooper. There's a wallop in his words that makes the studio and his woman friends open their eyes', and argues that Cooper's new found sophistication has given him the confidence to guard against manipulation from Paramount and his famous lovers. Unfortunately for Cooper, the Countess followed him to the USA and bought him a house just along the street from her own. He tried to ignore her and finally escaped her leash, and his own bad reputation, when he became engaged to Balfe, a young socialite from New York.

The marriage provided an end to the flamboyant first stage of Cooper's career. Once married, his social life all but disappeared from the popular press. He settled down and only rarely did he and 'Rocky' attend star-studded parties. Although his affairs did not stop altogether, he did become very discreet. All in all, the Coopers presented the image of a happily reclusive couple. Onscreen the established image of Cooper as the pretty cowboy and the romantic soldier, remained intact. After his success in Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), Cooper's image in the second stage of his career would also become synonymous with the pure Americana of a naive 'man-child'. This image gave Cooper some of his biggest non-Western hits, including *Meet John Doe* (Frank Capra, 1940), *Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks, 1941), *Ball of Fire* (Howard Hawks, 1941), and *The Pride of the Yankees* (Sam Wood, 1942). After a long draught in the late 1940s, a visibly aged Cooper entered the third prosperous stage of his career with *High Noon*, playing roles that commented ironically on his heroic image. Through it all, the early career of Cooper, from 1927 to 1935, set the standards by which he was both the ideal pin-up and the ideal rugged man.

²¹ Marion Leslie, 'I'm through being bossed', *Photoplay*, vol. 42 (October, 1932), p. 34.

Looking and identification

Cooper's early image, both cinematic and extra-cinematic, combines the apparently contradictory nature of the male pin-up and the macho hero, and makes relatively explicit the narcissistic possibilities that remain implicit in Hollywood's depiction of masculinity. Namely, that the 'heroic' construction of masculinity in traditionally male genres facilitates for male viewers the multi-layered possibilities of identification as both subject and object. As ego ideals put on display, in elaborately coded ways, stars like Gary Cooper work to define masculine norms. The objectifying/feminizing/fetishizing we see in Cooper's image is integral to our contemporary concept of masculinity. Identification with the masculine cinematic ego ideal involves an unstated recognition of the objectified properties inherent in star images such as Cooper's.

Cooper's display as a sexual commodity and simultaneous acceptance as ruggedly masculine indicates the indissoluble relation of object and subject within Hollywood's depiction of masculinity.

Cooper's onscreen objectification was more pronounced than it was for other male stars of the era because of his bankable popularity with female audiences. As the earlier quotation from Pumphrey indicates, the gender-aligned conventions of classical cinema force the image of the hero to combine feminine and masculine properties. The hero is like Victor Turner's liminal character, 'betwixt and between' cultural identities, apart from both the 'villains' and the 'townsfolk'. This liminal nature of heroes is not unique to classical cinema: according to the work of such renowned myth scholars as Joseph Campbell and Lord Raglan, the social alienation of the hero is an archetypal myth of all civilizations. It is in Hollywood's well-developed genre/gender codes and modern culture's use of stars as markers of sexual identity that characters like Cooper influence the gender norms of the culture at large.

Film traditionally encodes 'villains' as masculine – violent, physical, unwashed, uncaring – and the 'townsfolk' as feminine – courteous, clean, sophisticated, sensitive. The hero combines the best characteristics of both masculine and feminine identities to defeat the villains on behalf of the community. But the boundaries of the masculine/feminine, good/bad, subject/object dichotomies are fluid. While the hero represents the best of both worlds, he is often juxtaposed with the man who embodies the worst of both. Repeatedly, the most villainous character in male genres is the man concerned about his appearance. The businessman in expensive clothes, or the assassin vain about his looks – in short, any man who willingly displays himself for the gaze of others. Non-villainous male characters who fuss over their appearance always prove to be, at the very least, weak or ineffectual. While it is seen as a condemnable transgression of masculinity for characters to display themselves within the diegetic

narrative, the unacknowledged display of the hero that dominates the screen is coded as desirable. Thus, it is all right for Cooper to be filmed in soft focus *sans* shirt or just lounging around, but unacceptably vain for the new recruit to fuss over his dress uniform in *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*. As an ego ideal, the cinematic hero is a mixed lesson: a man must be concerned enough about his image to be separate from the ‘unwashed’ or physically less attractive villains, but he must appear indifferent enough about his image to avoid willingly inviting the gaze.

The cinematic ego ideal both invites the gaze and ignores it. Regardless of how the gaze is mediated through other characters’ points of view, the hero’s presence as a larger-than-life being who commands our visual attention marks him as an object of the male audience’s gaze. He serves as a role model for masculinity as the *Uberman* who defeats the bad guys, gets the girl and, as is made explicit in the case of Cooper, is sexually desired by women. This paradigm of cinematic masculinity that narratively condemns narcissism at the same time as it fetishizes the male hero/role model, creates a decisive tension between fetishistic narcissism and the criticism that comes with willingly inviting the look of others in real life. Much feminist criticism of popular culture has recognized the socially constructed dilemma women face in trying to live up to the glamorous image of models and screen stars. Men, on the other hand, have less often recognized (admittedly because it is less an imperative) that popular entertainments portray the ideal man as one who ‘acts’, but also, at an almost subliminal level, looks good without looking like he tried to look good.

This paradox creates the uneasy mix of humour and pathos with which men recognize Joe Buck’s narcissistic self-appraisal in *Midnight Cowboy*. Informed as the film is by the type of cowboy personified by Cooper, Buck’s assumption that all he has to do is show up in New York and there will be ‘plenty of rich women wantin’ a real man so bad they’ll be willing to pay for it’, seems understandable. Since the late nineteenth century, male sexuality has been closely linked to the hypermasculine image of the Western hero. In denying the explicit presence of eroticism by dressing the male body in the clothes of excessively masculine images such as the cowboy and the soldier, film has bonded male sexuality to the very fetishistic qualities with which it sought to disguise it. The quandary in real life comes in trying to balance these conflicting premises of masculinity. Outside of a Western film set, hypermasculine clothing loses its contextual appropriateness. Thus, out of context, Joe Buck’s stetson and tassled jacket lean towards the explicitly fetishistic side of the paradox. Ironically, it is in Buck’s over-identification with his screen idols that he breaks the second unspoken rule of masculinity and invites the gaze, marking him as homosexual.

The implicit erotic aspects of the hypermasculine image that is so

pervasive a role model within Western culture have been made plain in gay ‘butch’ identities and art. One only need think of the images assumed by the Village People – Cowboy, Soldier, Biker, Policeman, Indian – to recognize the erotic possibilities of excessively ‘heterosexual’ ideals. Likewise, the hypermasculinist art of Tom of Finland demonstrates the gaze inviting homoerotic properties of masculine/fetishistic clothing. Tom of Finland’s homoerotic sketches feature muscular men dressed in the very costumes that our culture uses to stress unquestionable heterosexuality. Yet, as Richard Mohr argues in *Gay Ideas*, the recognition of the erotic identities associated with these costumes as masculine ideals ‘exposes the stud to the charge of “faggot”’.²² By decontextualizing these standard signifiers of masculinity their narcissistic nature is revealed. Most men are concerned about their physical appearance, paying careful attention in private to how they look and the clothes they wear. Like the song says: ‘dressed up like a million dollar trooper, trying hard to look like Gary Cooper’ (‘Puttin’ on the Ritz’ [Harry Richman, 1930]). But the acknowledgement of this narcissism is considered ‘unmanly’. In discussing the challenge of homosexual ‘looking’ to heterosexual norms, Susan Bordo points out that ‘homoeroticism is paradoxical because it both embraces and violates masculinity’.²³ The paradox is that homoeroticism embraces the conventional signifiers of masculinity but violates the denial of inviting the gaze that is crucial to heterosexual standards.

Even now that the Western genre has been supplanted by the action genre as the preeminent purveyor of masculinity, the archetypal cowboy, as personified by Cooper, still informs cinema’s construction of masculinity. Most modern action movies are really just disguised Westerns, although with regard to masculinity, action films appear to reposition presentations of the male body. Discussing the conservative political position of action films within a postmodern culture, Pumphrey claims that ‘on the surface, the difference between their representation of masculinity and the Western’s are obvious. They wilfully expose the naked bodies of their heroes and openly play with images that ten years ago were available only as gay pornography.’²⁴ Yet the masculine paradox created by cinema’s fetishization of male Ego ideals remains intact. The Stallones and Schwarzeneggers and Van Dammes may reveal more of the body, but it is a body as heavily coded as hypermasculine as one wearing the uniform of a soldier or cowboy. Their muscles are their masculine clothing, worn in part to negate the ‘feminizing’ properties of the male pin-up. The ‘natural’ muscles of the hero are presented as a sexual ideal, yet their existence is all but ignored by the hero. Rather, like the Western dandy, it is the villain in action films who is narcissistically concerned with his Armani suit, which is coded as more ‘unnatural’ than the hero’s body. The danger of over-identifying with the muscular masculine ideal has

²² Richard Mohr, *Gay Ideas: Outing and Other Controversies* (New York: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 197.

²³ Susan Bordo, ‘Reading the male body’, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, vol. 32, no. 4 (1993), p. 716.

²⁴ Pumphrey, ‘Why do cowboys wear hats in the bath?’, p. 95.

often been discussed as a feminizing invitation of the gaze in relation to the subculture of the body builder.

That contemporary cinema's portrayal of masculinity is based on a preexisting model is apparent in films that self-reflexively construct their heroes in the Gary Cooper mould. *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) contains an insightful allusion that links the action hero to his feminized cowboy predecessors. Early on in the film, Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman) taunts the hero, John McClane (Bruce Willis), about his misplaced heroics. 'Just another American who saw too many movies as a child?' prods Gruber, 'an orphan of a bankrupt culture who thinks he's John Wayne, Rambo, Marshall Dillon?' Holding McClane at gun point he sneers: 'This time John Wayne does not walk off into the sunset with Grace Kelly', but in true heroic fashion, McClane responds by blowing Gruber away, clarifying his mistake by saying 'Gary Cooper, asshole'.

Gary Cooper's star image was constructed as a masculine ideal fetishized by hypermasculine roles and explicitly feminized by cinematic conventions of filming. His ability to reconcile masculine and feminine traits within a single persona demonstrates Hollywood's narcissistic subtext underlying heterosexual masculine norms. The objectification of Cooper allows us to glimpse Hollywood's practice of both looking at the male as a sexual ideal, a role model for identification, and denying the obvious invitation of that look. The imperative of masculine eroticism, to care about one's appearance but not appear to care, is reinforced by the very *careful* presentation of Cooper as an object to be looked at and the diegetic denial of that look. Cooper's diversity of roles, and his dual image as rugged and 'pretty', reinforced by his womanizing personal life, all work to expose the objectified nature of cinematic ideals of masculinity.

Gender, ethnicity and cultural crisis in *Falling Down* and *Groundhog Day*

JUDE DAVIES

'Movies reflect society, and there have been several movies in the US about anger in the street but they had all been by African-Americans. Well, they're not the only angry people in the United States.'

Joel Schumacher¹

Made in defence and explanation of his box-office success *Falling Down* (1993), director Joel Schumacher's comment on anger and African-American film overtly reads like a clear statement of white male cultural hegemony. He implies that the definitive film treatment of anger cannot be made 'just' by a marginal group, but must proceed from a culturally-central, preeminent identity. However, these assumptions sit uneasily with the defensiveness of the comment, which derives from a sense that US culture is in crisis precisely because the centrality and preeminence of the white male can no longer be taken for granted. For Schumacher, political correctness is not only a threat to his own artistic freedom, but a symptom of a cultural crisis in the USA.² Yet, while he describes his aim in directing *Falling Down* as somehow to resolve this crisis, in many respects the film demonstrates a commitment to a politically correct portrayal of race and gender issues, and it deeply (though not completely) problematizes white masculinity.

These ambiguities signal a raising of the political stakes in the subgenre of male transformation narratives identified by Susan Jeffords in her essay 'The big switch: Hollywood masculinity in the nineties'.³ Jeffords views with heavily qualified optimism the

¹ Joel Schumacher, quoted in Mark Salisbury, 'He's an "ordinary man at war with the everyday world" . . .', *Empire* (July 1993), pp. 76–78.

² *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³ Susan Jeffords, 'The big switch: Hollywood masculinity in the nineties', in Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (eds), *Film Theory Goes to the Movies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 196–208.

'transformation' of the hard-fighting male heroes of 1980s Hollywood – Rambo, Indiana Jones, et al. – into gentle family men in 1991 films such as *Regarding Henry* (Mike Nichols), *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (James Cameron), *The Fisher King* (Terry Gilliam), and *City Slickers* (Ron Underwood). As a feminist, while welcoming the general principle of change in men, Jeffords deplores the continued association in these films of gentleness with the family and domesticity. She goes on to argue that these narratives of male transformation remain wedded to conservative notions of race and gender. Firstly, these Hollywood versions of masculinity remain exclusively white, and thereby construct male suffering as caused by accidents of personal history, such as lack of love, rather than structural historical actualities such as racial oppression. Secondly, expanding comments by Donna Haraway, Jeffords argues that men's acquisition of gentleness serves mainly to buttress their privileged position.

More recent movies, including critical successes such as Clint Eastwood's *Unforgiven* (1992) and commercial disappointments such as the Arnold Schwarzenegger vehicle *Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan, 1993), have borne out Jeffords's cautiousness more than her optimism. Here, I will build on Jeffords's comments to examine two commercially successful films whose popularity implies the existence of a large audience for representations of masculinity in crisis. Joel Schumacher's *Falling Down* and Harold Ramis's *Groundhog Day* (1993) can be seen, with more or less plausibility, as representing the most progressive, self-questioning examples of genres which, from *Rambo* to *Last Action Hero* and *Unforgiven*, have been quicker to play with cinematic conventions than to question traditional constructions of gender or ethnicity.⁴

4 For further discussion of the press reception of *Falling Down*, and comparison with *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, see my article 'Falling Down and white masculinity in 90s Hollywood' forthcoming in *Journal of Gender Studies*.

Joel Schumacher's thriller ironically reverses the earlier transformation narratives: a white male is pushed into violence to overcome the difficulties which surround his attempt to return to home and family. I will argue that *Falling Down*, a complex and not completely coherent film, goes some way towards redefining racial difference into relations of economic class, but reinforces old-fashioned gender roles through continually identifying gentleness with femininity and domesticity. Although very different in terms of genre and tonal range, *Groundhog Day* also figures white masculinity in crisis. In this romantic comedy, the down-home values of small-town America provide the space for a Capraesque redemption of urban masculinity. Here, as I will argue in the latter part of this article, the transformation of cynical sexist into acceptable male is achieved in part by ignoring considerations of race and gender politics. While this underlines the film's difference from *Falling Down*, which deliberately invokes such concerns, both movies make explicit links between a historical 'American' crisis and a crisis of white masculinity in ways which merit close attention.

Commenting on *Falling Down* in the film monthly *Empire*, Schumacher employed two incommensurate rhetorics. In one, he stressed the universality of the central character Bill Foster, a ‘seemingly ordinary guy . . . who snaps suddenly’, whose urban frustrations all could sympathize with, if not some of his responses. ‘His release is so identifiable to all of our angers’, Schumacher told *Empire*, ‘because they’re simple ones’ such as ‘getting out of the car in the middle of traffic; the desire to maybe pull out a gun if you don’t get something your way’. Schumacher called the script ‘so representative’, with ‘that everyday *insanity* to it’.⁵ The film’s publicity materials portray Foster similarly, the trailer and the advertising poster describing him as an ‘everyday guy’ and an ‘ordinary man’. Yet in the same article Schumacher is quoted describing him as an incarnation of ‘one of these invisible people that we don’t pay attention to . . .’, a member of the ‘many armies of men’ largely ignored by contemporary US media.⁶ In this particularized guise, which the film’s star Michael Douglas has also described, Bill Foster is an example of a specific type, the Average White Male, facing a crisis of power at a particular moment in US history. Foster’s hypernormality, overdetermined from the first scene, openly positions the film with respect to debates about multiculturalism and political correctness.

Although I have used the epithet Bill Foster, for most of the film its (anti)hero remains anonymous, but once identified, the police refer to him by the letters on his car licence plate: D-FENS. This double naming reinforces his double position as representing masculinity and a pluralist gendered and racial position. Bill Foster sounds Anglo or black, while D-FENS is non-gendered and racially unspecific. Unsurprisingly, it is ‘D-FENS’ which appears on the credits at the end of the film opposite Michael Douglas’s name. This double naming signals Schumacher’s attempt to articulate a more widely-based anger than that of African-American film and, at the same time, to balance a culture apparently skewed away from white maleness. In this sense, the film opens itself to criticism over the figuring of supposedly general ills by a protagonist primarily representative of a group – white males – who remain singularly privileged. Schumacher’s and Douglas’s descriptions of Foster as ‘ordinary man’ and Schumacher’s insistence that Foster’s story articulates ‘all our angers’ betoken familiarly patriarchal or phallocentric ways of thinking in which the position of the white male is taken as normal and typical. As many feminists have argued, such rhetorics marginalize racial and gendered identities which are not white and male in ways that are all the more powerful for their not being explicitly articulated.⁷

In many respects, *Falling Down* anticipates such criticisms and makes obvious efforts to conform to some demands of political correctness. The film not only contains positive images of blacks and women, but also stresses bonds of friendship and identification that

⁵ Salisbury, ‘He’s an “ordinary man at war with the everyday world” . . .’, p. 77.

⁶ Ibid., p. 78.

⁷ There is, of course, a long tradition of feminist work in this area; in the field of film and cultural studies the point is made particularly cogently in Tania Modleski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a ‘Post-Feminist’ Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁸ I have followed the film's credit sequence in calling the (antihero) D-FENS. This is what he is called most often in the film, though family members call him Bill and he is also referred to as 'GI Joe', the significance of which I will describe later.

cross race and gender lines. For example, D-FENS identifies with a black protester he sees in the street picketing a bank for its alleged racism.⁸ The man carries a placard bearing the words 'not economically viable', and he shouts the phrase repeatedly, claiming that the bank had employed it as coded racism. As he is being taken away in a police car the man says 'Don't forget me', and in the final scene of the film D-FENS describes himself as 'not economically viable'. Equally, Prendergast (played by Robert Duvall), the white cop who tracks D-FENS, is represented as enjoying a warm, asexual friendship with his younger, female, hispanic colleague Sandra (Rachel Ticotin).

However, readings of *Falling Down* as backlash movie revised for political correctness seriously underplay the complexity of the film. In what follows, I will make clear that the universalizing tendency of the film is continually troubled and undermined by racial categorizations (which keep overflowing the binary channelling the film seeks to impose) and internal fissures and contradictions within the film's constructions of masculinity. Ultimately, and especially in the closing scene, the film has the effect of ironizing notions of 'the ordinary man' as white and middle class.

The opening of *Falling Down* plays the double game of portraying the white male as both typically and especially frustrated by conditions in contemporary USA. It is a micro-version of the 'average short-tempered neighbour who just happened to break' narrative. The first frames are a closeup of a mouth, identifiable as the camera moves back as that of a white male (played by Michael Douglas). The scene is a traffic jam, emblematic of 'everyone's' workaday frustrations, of the stalled US economy, of the apparently intractable budget deficit. The camera cuts between a range of faces stuck in this same boat: caucasian, hispanic, black, male, female, middle-aged, very young (children on a school bus, the only ones frustrating rather than frustrated). A woman driver uses her door mirror to put on lipstick. Some hispanic children and their cuddly toys stare fixedly from the car in front. Two men in a sports car argue into a cellular telephone. The first face appears with increasing frequency; it is that of a white male in a white shirt and tie, with a buzz cut and glasses only one step more stylish than aviator frames. He gradually loses his cool as his car's air conditioning fails and then its window winder breaks off in his hand. Eventually he gets out of the car, registration D-FENS, and walks away. Asked by an irate motorist where the hell he thinks he is going, he replies, 'Home'.

Clearly, then, this as yet unnamed white male is marked out as the film's major protagonist, and as epitomizing the notion that white males have it the same as everyone else, only worse. But the close of the scene begins to undermine the positioning of D-FENS as typifying masculinity. As he disappears over the embankment, a middle-aged man persuades a traffic cop to help push the abandoned car off the

road. He identifies himself as Prendergast, a police officer on the way to his last day at his desk job before retirement. From this point on, *Falling Down* parallels the relations of both men with women and with non-whites. This paralleling is announced symbolically by an advertisement hoarding noticed by Prendergast in this first scene. Partially obscured by trees, it shows a woman in a bikini with the caption 'White is for laundry'. Deprived of their commodity referent, the words invoke some sort of racial taunt. To complete the message, a graffiti artist has drawn a cartoon man trapped in the woman's cleavage, shouting 'Help Me!'. Symbolically (or even cryptically), the implication is that white American males have to contend with a cultural marginalization on top of the general frustrations to which everyone is subject. The hoarding thereby reinforces the symbolic coupling of Prendergast and D-FENS, and emphasizes the ways in which the film's narrative sets them up as paired versions of masculinity in parallel stories.

The film's portrayal of Prendergast offers a version of masculinity which apparently differs markedly from D-FENS. Prendergast is already marked out in this first scene as having qualities of patience and stability, and it is he who embodies, by the end of the film, an acceptable masculinity alongside which D-FENS can be judged. In the final scene, he even takes the place of D-FENS as husband and father, dispensing sympathy and advice to D-FENS's Italian-American ex-wife Beth (Barbara Hershey) on the steps of her home. This first scene is paradigmatic also of Prendergast's relation to D-FENS in the film's narrative: from the first, he tidies up and restores order after D-FENS's extreme behaviour. Thus the film implies a 'politically correct' reading in which Prendergast's masculinity is offered not only as more acceptable, but also, ultimately, more powerful. However, there are two marked strains in the film which undermine this reading: firstly the elements which centralize and normalize D-FENS, and secondly the adoption of aggression and violence in the narrative of Prendergast's regeneration from burnt-out desk jockey to dynamic family man.

The rest of the film intercuts the narratives of this day as experienced by three protagonists: D-FENS, Prendergast, and Beth (who is very much the least significant in terms of scenes and screen time). Prendergast will track the progress of D-FENS across Los Angeles from gangland to Beth's house near Venice Beach (which used to be the Foster family home), eventually catching up with him at the end of the film. En route, in between increasingly threatening telephone calls to his ex-wife, D-FENS encounters the 'everyday' frustrations presented by the city. A Korean shopkeeper refuses to make change for the telephone and charges high prices; the smiling unhelpful staff of a burger bar refuse to serve him the breakfast menu because he is a few seconds late; he 'trespasses' on territories claimed by gang-members, a homeless beggar, construction workers and a pair

of wealthy golfers. D-FENS responds to all this with ever-increasing violence, though his most violent attack is reserved for the neo-Nazi proprietor of an army surplus store, who attacks and threatens to rape him.

⁹ On this, and also for a different reading of D-FENS as 'average white male', see Carol Clover, 'White noise', *Sight and Sound* (May 1993), pp. 6-9.

The neo-Nazi, as Carol Clover has noted, occupies a crucial third masculine position.⁹ He embodies the worst elements of traditional masculinity, to a psychotic degree. He is aggressive, misogynist, homophobic, racist, and he thinks he recognizes D-FENS as a brother, hiding him from Sandra when she comes into the store, and sexually harassing her as she leaves. This is just one of many misreadings of D-FENS, the first of which is made much earlier by the Korean shopkeeper, who thinks he is intent on theft. D-FENS rejects the neo-Nazi's beliefs, in the name of American pluralism, a speech culminating in his yelling 'I'm an American; you're an asshole'. Here, D-FENS defines Americanness as an openness to debate and respect for diversity, against the closedness of fascism. He construes the USA as essentially multicultural, as composed of people with diverse racial and gendered identities and sexual orientations. The speech distances D-FENS from patriarchal exclusivity and 'masculine' closedness, and establishes him as standing up for liberal American values before, under threat himself, he kills the fascist who menaces these values.

This message is amplified symbolically by the scene that immediately follows. Prendergast and Sandra arrive at the Korean shop, and Prendergast looks up to see the advertising hoarding from the first scene. In recognizing it, he also recognizes that the man he has been hunting is the driver of D-FENS. In addition, seen again in its entirety, the hoarding cries out for symbolic interpretation. It turns out to be an advertisement for 'Hawaiian Tropic' tanning products. Hence the display of a tanned woman and the 'white is for laundry' slogan. Seen in full, the sign is used to proclaim an anti-racist message. The title of the product is in itself an announcement of the racial and cultural diversity of the USA. Further, tanning products signify that not only skin colour but race are interchangeable, and even that white is not, or should not be regarded as, preeminent. This liberal message is borne out by the way in which blacks are portrayed positively throughout the film, but relies for its meaning on the manipulation of a tanned woman. She is, of course, yellow; and it is definitions of white/Asian and male/female that *Falling Down* produces confusedly, invoking conservative versions of these identities and their relations which betray the film's aspirations to political correctness.

The scene in the army surplus store is an obvious attempt to establish the film's liberal credentials, but on closer inspection it demonstrates an unease with race and gender issues. At the end of the scene, having killed the neo-Nazi (pretty much in self-defence), D-FENS telephones his wife from the store and is at his most threatening yet. This echoes the neo-Nazi's harassment of Sandra, if

not the identifiably perverse violent pornography kept in the back of the shop. D-FENS tells Beth that he has 'passed the point of no return' and compares himself to the astronauts trapped in their Apollo rocket on an ill-fated moon mission. The scene is indeed pivotal. It marks a shift in D-FENS's targets from the violent opposition to 'everyday ills' such as inflation, petty behaviour and arbitrary power to less discriminating attacks, largely over territorial rights.

Throughout the film, the local and sectoral control of Los Angeles (by ethnic groups, construction workers, country club members) is portrayed as emblematic of the disintegration of the USA, and symbolic of ethnic, gender and racial lobby politics, quota policies . . . the symptoms of a political correctness portrayed as bogus. In the first place, D-FENS subjects the territorial claims of the gang members to open and honest consideration, according to WASP traditions. But in the surplus store scene, reason (rational argument, science as space technology), and morality come to seem useless, and D-FENS abandons them, relying instead on brute power. From now on, he invades territory at will, and justifies himself with firearms. Yet even before the 'moment of no return' there are signs that D-FENS has certain cultural complicities with the neo-Nazi.

In the first confrontation of the film, D-FENS's anger at contemporary Los Angeles is construed in terms of the loss of a better, past America. Outraged at the prices charged in the Korean's shop, he erupts 'Let's roll back prices to 1965 – what do you think of that?' For the neo-Nazi, 1965 signifies not only a time when few Koreans ran American shops, but also a time of war in southeast Asia, illustrations of which adorn the outside of his store. These are not overtly D-FENS's narratives, and the film goes out of its way to make this clear. The neo-Nazi misinterprets the burger-bar incident, assuming that D-FENS was motivated by hatred of 'niggers'. In fact the scene we have been shown earlier flatly contradicts this: the burger-bar workers were all white, and at the end of the scene it is a black child who, hesitatingly, raises his hand to answer D-FENS's question. Still earlier, D-FENS is shown to have patience with and even grudging respect for the territorial claims of a hispanic gang. Also, by this point in the film he has encountered the 'not economically viable' protester, and later, it is a black kid who will show D-FENS how to use the missile launcher given to him by the neo-Nazi. Throughout the film D-FENS is defended against charges of racism, but only by reference to his relations with blacks, and to a lesser extent hispanics.

Even so, the scene in the army surplus store throws up some disturbing similarities between the neo-Nazi's fantasy of a racially-pure Amerika and D-FENS's alienation from contemporary America. Early in the scene D-FENS asks to see some boots. The proprietor launches into a comparison between an expensive hi-tech pair and some jungle boots, which he regards as dependable and

authentic because they have been used in combat. Now the uses he describes for such boots – stomping on Viet Cong and on homosexuals – are anathema to D-FENS, though he does not at this point demur. Yet the neo-Nazi has struck a chord. The jungle boots, like D-FENS's earlier attempt to 'roll back prices to 1965' betoken a time when experience could be relied upon, when hard work was rewarded, and before technology made people like himself obsolete. For the neo-Nazi the jungle boots represent masculine practice versus effete theory. Not only does the film endorse this definition of authenticity, but this endorsement is one of its strongest appeals.

The power of D-FENS's confrontation scenes comes from his status as an ordinary individual, who has been lied to by those who hold political power and control the media. Like a cross between Arthur Miller's Willy Loman and John Arden's Jack Musgrave, D-FENS stands up for the views and the rights of those excluded from power.¹⁰ He confronts profiteering in the Korean's store; he confronts corporate power and misleading advertising in the burger-bar, and he confronts road construction workers with charges of civic corruption and 'inflated budgets'. All of these scenes present D-FENS as an archetypal, universal figure challenging power in the name of reason and natural justice, a white male standing up for the rights of whites and blacks, men and women; that is why audiences clapped and cheered.

But in the latter part of the film the universality of this appeal is undermined. The myths of democracy and justice to which D-FENS appeals in the first part of the film come to seem mere apologies for the exercise of power. The better, more authentic America appealed to by D-FENS has too much in common with the neo-Nazi's vision of Amerika. The sectoral control of the city by different groups is foregrounded by D-FENS's experiences. But the film seems unable to imagine a deterritorialization of the city, only a reterritorialization. This reterritorialization includes blacks within the circle of privilege and allows hispanics on the margins, but firmly excludes Asians.

Almost from the beginning of the film, D-FENS has repeatedly encroached on territories claimed by different groups. His first mistake is to assume that he is in a patch of wasteland, which turns out to bear graffiti proclaiming in unfamiliar signs that it is the property of a hispanic gang. From the surplus store scene onwards, this territorialization of the USA is construed in specific terms: it becomes increasingly clear that the problem with Los Angeles is that it has become Vietnam. Cinematic signifiers of the Vietnam war abound from this scene on. As D-FENS walks past the pictures of Vietnam on the outside of the store, the sound of helicopters is heard, a sound repeated throughout the rest of the film. When next seen, D-FENS is dressed in black combat uniform, presumably taken from the store. The uniform makes him look more like a Viet Cong soldier than an American MIA, emblematising the way in which D-FENS's

¹⁰ In Arden's play *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959) the eponymous hero attempts to start a revolution in a small mining town in the North of England, but fails when forced into using the violent means of the Empire he is trying to overthrow. One of Arden's comments on audience reactions to Musgrave throws light on the portrayal of D-FENS: '...the fact that the sympathies of the play are clearly with him in his original horror, and then turn against him and his intended remedy, seems to have bewildered many people'. John Arden, Author's Introduction, *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 7.

surrendering of reason puts him officially beyond the pale of white masculinity. More precisely, the uniform represents the MIA (masculinity in America) as having become Viet Cong. Dressed like this, D-FENS makes construction sites look like defoliated battlefields and transforms the woods of the Altmore Country Club into jungle. When he finally arrives at Venice Beach for the film's climax, the imagery crystallizes. There buildings are flimsy, the atmosphere is hot. The place is swarming with colour and noise, with exotically dressed, tanned people, with Hare Krishnas. Exotic foods are on sale. Advertising posters peeling from wooden buildings, tacky foreign-made souvenirs on sale, and the battered picket fence round Beth's house give a veneer of Americanness to some sub-tropical, essentially foreign place. D-FENS has arrived in Saigon.

What this means for D-FENS is that a kind of reverse imperialism has taken place. If he is an MIA, as his costume implies, D-FENS comes home to find he is regarded as a Viet Cong. He is no longer welcome in his own home – the divorce judge has forbidden him from coming within a certain distance of Beth (the absurdity of this particular example of political correctness demonstrated by her inability to remember the precise distance specified by the judge). Worse, his home has been colonized. As he tells Beth in disgust, the ice-cream shop they used to frequent has turned into a tacky souvenir shop, and instead of a rocking horse he can buy his daughter only a unicorn with an Indian on top of it. D-FENS's homecoming then is doubly frustrated. Not only do his wife and child run away from him in terror, but home is not home any more.

The significance of all this for the film is more complex. Firstly, it is clear that the attempt to universalize the white male position falls apart. As if to signify this, as soon as the police officers in pursuit learn of D-FENS's change of costume, they call him GI Joe, which has none of the race- and gender-openness of the former epithet. However, GI Joe's homecoming is more difficult to read. Since the film's climactic scenes present Venice Beach as D-FENS/GI Joe sees it, Schumacher seems to demand that viewers agree that what has gone wrong with the USA is that it has become foreign. But while we are being asked to validate D-FENS/GI Joe's perceptions, we are distanced more than ever from his actions – he is on the verge of running amok at this stage. And the identification of D-FENS/GI Joe with VC Charlie adds to the confusion, setting up two mutually exclusive readings of the film's narrative which can be schematized as follows:

1. D-FENS, ordinary guy, makes righteous stand for everyone's rights, but is transformed by corrupt society into a dangerous maniac with whom, nevertheless, we have some sympathy.
2. D-FENS, white male, adopts liberal version of US ideology to shore up his power, but shows his true colours when the chips are down.

It will be noted that the identification with Asianness, via Viet Cong, is perjorative in both cases.

If *Falling Down* hangs on to a negative definition of Asianness, it also anchors itself by reference to a stable cluster of traditional meanings around femininity and domesticity. D-FENS wants to go home to regain his sensitivity and finer feelings, but also, and more strongly, because home means security and power. Having lost his job, D-FENS seeks to find himself again as husband and father, going home, as he frequently reiterates, for his daughter's birthday. In this sense, *Falling Down* is almost classically Engelsian, presenting the home as the arena where working-class men can exercise power when defeated in the public sphere. He wants to drop his public self 'D-FENS' and become 'Bill'. *Falling Down* presents this ambiguously. On the one hand, Beth is presented according to the conventional terms of the thriller, as a weak female who needs the protection of Prendergast. On the other hand, D-FENS's feelings for his child are presented sympathetically, defining him as a good man because he feels strongly as a father. This contradiction is dramatized in the climactic scene of the film, a shoot-out at the end of Venice pier.

Prendergast sends Beth and the child to safety, and faces D-FENS alone. This sets up the scene as that Hollywood classic, the cop/villain confrontation, in which D-FENS wonderingly accepts his role, 'I'm the bad guy?'. As a good guy, Prendergast has also proved himself a new man. He treats his own wife with great patience and sensitivity, and his warm, politically-correct friendship with Sandra comes into more prominence after the pair set off to Venice Beach to apprehend D-FENS. Moreover, he is ridiculed by his male colleagues for these relationships, and his lack of traditionally masculine characteristics. Prendergast's boss, Captain Yardley, is particularly macho and particularly dismissive of Prendergast's masculinity, especially his alleged fear of the streets and his reluctance to swear. As if to underline the distinction, in successive scenes both Yardley and D-FENS wield gym bags.

However, the emphasis on D-FENS as a father undermines any simple reading of the scene as a face-off between good guy/new man and bad guy. Prendergast, assuming that he knows D-FENS, tells him 'You're here to kill your wife and daughter', but from all the audience knows, nothing could be further from his mind. Prendergast thereby makes himself merely the latest of many people to misread D-FENS. Believing that D-FENS is armed, though he has only his daughter's water pistol, Prendergast ends up shooting D-FENS dead. The audience realizes that D-FENS has engineered his death in order to provide financially for his daughter through his life insurance. In death then, D-FENS's fatherhood transforms him from maniac to hero. At the same time, changes in Prendergast complicate the scene still further. Just before leaving the office he has finally asserted himself against his wife's demands, telling her to do the shopping and make

sure his dinner is cooked as he likes it for his return home. On his way out, he punches a male colleague who has been teasing him all day. After shooting D-FENS, he goes on to use his new hero status in order to gain revenge on Captain Yardley. He responds to Yardley's congratulations with 'Fuck you', on live television – doubly ironic since Yardley has earlier called Prendergast's masculinity and trustworthiness into question on the grounds that he does not curse. At the close of the film, Prendergast plays the surrogate father to Beth and child, assuring the latter that he has decided to defy his wife and remain a police officer. Thus, as in its presentation of race, *Falling Down* offers two mutually exclusive readings of acceptable masculinity. D-FENS becomes a hero by being a self-sacrificing father. Prendergast becomes a hero (and a surrogate father himself) by sacrificing a father.

By themselves then, in their different ways, the narratives of D-FENS and of Prendergast complement Jeffords's 'transformation' narratives. While D-FENS regresses from new man to old villain when denied access to home and family, Prendergast gets to be both loving father and assertive, gunfighting male, thereby demonstrating the astuteness of Donna Haraway's insight into the relationship between masculine gentleness and privilege. It would be idle to claim, though, that *Falling Down* offered any critique of male transformation movies, given its negative construction of Asianness and its continued identification of femininity with domesticity and sensitivity.

However, *Falling Down* does present as crucial one set of determinants usually ignored in male transformation films – economics. In the final scene D-FENS and Prendergast are differentiated most strongly because one has a job and the other does not. It is this economic difference that transcends the white/black racial divide. D-FENS, unable to provide even maintenance payments for his child, has more in common with the black protester than he has with Prendergast. In explaining himself to the cop he repeats the phrase used by the protester 'I'm obsolete – not economically viable', and in doing so confirms that poverty links him with the black more powerfully than race links him with Prendergast. The difference between rich man and poor man is figured most effectively by D-FENS's death. Unable to sell his labour, which is no longer required, it is only by dying that D-FENS can provide for his daughter. In the last scene of *Falling Down*, economics is more determinant than race or gender.

In the first speech of *Groundhog Day*, television weatherman Phil Connors (Bill Murray) predicts, among other things, continued gang wars in California. After his spot is over, the following programme is announced as an investigation of sex and violence in the movies. These are cursory references to crises that are constructed both as

endemic and as media-saturated, if not media-produced. *Groundhog Day* is a romantic comedy, but it is hard not to see the subsequent transformation of Phil Connors from sexist cynic to honest gentleman as some sort of resolution of these social and cultural problems. This marks out the film as a comedic alternative to *Falling Down*. Phil Connors personifies cynical, aggressive white masculinity, faced with a recalcitrant universe. But instead of descending into violence, he freely chooses to clean up his act and to take the path of honesty and virtue. However, as I will show, the comedic resolution offered by *Groundhog Day* is in many ways unsatisfactory. The film distances itself in time and space from the problematic issues touched upon in the opening scene, and relies on conservative stereotypical constructions of race and gender to resolve them.

In fact there are many parallels between Connors's narrative and that of Prendergast in *Falling Down*. When they first appear, both men are washed up in career terms, have low status and command little respect from their colleagues. The films tell the stories of Connors's redemption and Prendergast's regeneration. If both films engage with anxiety on the part of white males who feel powerless, their prescriptions are complementary, and look to traditional myths of regeneration through violence, or to a consciously old-fashioned version of masculinity as gentlemanliness, embedded in a self-consciously retrospective cinematic redemption narrative.¹¹ The gentler, morally reformative narrative of *Groundhog Day*, which resolves itself overtly in worthiness and antisexism, has made it more acceptable to liberal critics. However, as I will show, the film is ultimately more conservative, sidestepping the cultural and social flashpoints cited above, and taking refuge in fantasy. Whereas the dysfunctional narrative of D-FENS's fall *down* takes precedence over the regeneration narrative of Prendergast's fall *up*, contemporary urban realities are not allowed to puncture the fantasy resolutions of *Groundhog Day*. It is important to note that this is primarily an issue of coherence and only partly and fortuitously a matter of genre. I am not claiming that there are reasons intrinsic to form that make it necessarily more difficult to attain ideological closure in a thriller compared with a romantic comedy.¹² Nevertheless, the incoherence of *Falling Down* boosted its marketability in a way that would have been impossible for *Groundhog Day*, which depended for much of its appeal on satisfying audiences with a coherent resolution.

Groundhog Day opens with cloud footage, accompanied by a 1950s-style polka. The first scene, set in a television studio, marks Connors out as frustrated yet still ambitious, impatient, and resentful of having to make another trip to Punxsutawney, PA to witness the town's annual Groundhog Day. There, every February 2nd, local dignitaries wake a groundhog from hibernation. The groundhog's reaction to his own shadow is supposed to be predictive of the onset of spring. Cameraman Larry (Chris Elliott) drives the complaining

¹¹ The primary reference is *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946), which is quoted frequently in the closing scene of *Groundhog Day*.

¹² Steve Neale has written persuasively on the ideological closure of recent Hollywood romantic comedies, but it is important to avoid assuming closure *a priori*. See Steve Neale, 'The big romance or something wild?: romantic comedy today', *Screen*, vol. 33, no. 3 (1992), pp. 284–99.

Connors and producer Rita Hanson (Andie Macdowell) from Pittsburgh to Punxsutawney, back into small-town America. They find sleeping accommodation and cover the groundhog ceremony next day. Having been unwilling to go to Punxsutawney, it soon becomes clear that Connors is unable to leave. On their way back to Pittsburgh the crew run into a blizzard and they return to Punxsutawney to stay the night. Worse is to follow: Connors wakes to find that it is February 2nd again. The rest of the film, except the last few minutes, is composed of repeated and different versions of this day.

Having got over the initial shock, Connors uses the foreknowledge gained from his repeating day for selfish motives. He gets drunk and arrested without fear of consequences, seduces women and robs a security van. He hatches an elaborate plan to seduce Rita, but when this fails he becomes despondent and attempts suicide. Giving up the attempt to bed Rita by stealth, Connors embarks on a programme of good works and self-improvement. Thanks to this, both he and Rita come to appreciate one another, and after they spend a chaste night together the repetition cycle is broken.

Groundhog Day treads a fine line between making it clear that Phil Connors has genuinely changed, and sinking into the bathos of a full-blown Capraesque redemption narrative. By and large, its pacing, the use of gags and jokes, and Murray's performance itself, which repels and attracts not only alternately but also, on occasion, simultaneously, make it successful. Bill Murray is, of course, well known to audiences for playing characters who move from cynical single men to romantic partners, and in doing so curb their wisecracking and are, to an extent, domesticated (see for example *Ghostbusters* [Ivan Reitman, 1984] or *Scrooged* [Richard Donner, 1988]). *Groundhog Day* raises a number of uncertainties surrounding white masculinity more explicitly than these earlier films, but it still evades their most serious implications.

Through its opening references and subsequent narrative, *Groundhog Day*, like *Falling Down*, links a sense of the USA in crisis with the destabilization of white masculinity. At first sight, *Groundhog Day* seems to offer a more acceptable treatment of the theme. It consistently places the viewer outside Phil Connors's position, and represents his masculinity as both problematic in itself and susceptible to change. With half an eye on political correctness, the film can even be read as offering a reconstruction of white masculinity as some kind of alternative, or perhaps even solution, to crisis. Phil Connors (note the initials) goes unwillingly to Punxsutawney a cynical urban sexist, and is regenerated there to become honest, virtuous, acceptable. In small-town America, Connors unlearns the aggressive and manipulative behaviour that D-FENS adopts in Los Angeles. Through its small-town setting and its manipulation of time, the film keeps the most discussed ills of nineties America (gang war in California, sex and violence in the movies) at a distance. The only non-white in the

film (and, apparently, in the whole of Punxsutawney), is the stereotypical black barman who serves in the town's premier hotel. To sum up, in *Groundhog Day*, problems with white masculinity are resolved by reference to a patriarchal and racially pure notion of the past.

In Punxsutawney Phil responds to Rita's rejection of his egotistical self by embracing old-time patriarchal values. Phil's good deeds are very traditionally masculine: he repairs a flat tyre for a carload of women, he catches a boy falling from a tree, he practises the Heimlich manoeuvre on a choking diner. One possible exception is Phil's unsuccessful attempt to save the life of a dying tramp. As if to warn him off, and onto more traditionally masculine works, a nurse insists on the necessity of accepting the inevitability of death from natural causes. His attempts at self-improvement involve reading a book while seated at a cafe and learning to play the piano. These pursuits are meant to signify that Phil has acquired good taste, and when taken out of the small-town context, would be immediately recognizable as the accomplishments of the middle-class gentleman.

In fact, the mechanism of the repeating day silently distances Phil from the economic considerations that would signify his class position, allowing him to spend as much as he has each day, effectively replenishing any money he spends. The importance of economics, obscured or ignored through most of the film, is stressed unexpectedly when Connors secures immediate piano tuition by giving the teacher one thousand dollars. The naked display of economic power here makes this the one laugh in the film that is slightly awkward. While it is Phil's new-found sensitivity that earns Rita's warmth (it would be exaggerating to say that she is allowed to display desire), this sensitivity is defined in terms of patriarchal, middle-class accomplishments. In this context, while the reconciliation at the end is convincing in terms of the protagonists, Connors's change of character enables him to take control over Rita rather than making possible equal relations between them. Instead the film displays its own 'sensitivity' by distancing the viewer from Phil's egotism, and through a message in its end titles, which vouches for the supervision of animals during filming, and claims that 'No animals were harmed during the making of *Groundhog Day*'.

The film's awkwardly faint revisionism gets most frayed during its climax, which details the last of the repeated days. Having become convinced of Phil's popularity in Punxsutawney and his moral and spiritual regeneration, Rita 'buys' him at a charity auction. They return to Phil's boarding house and he explains his feelings, his devotion, and his unworthiness to Rita as she dozes and falls asleep. Cut to six am and the bedside radio alarm plays Sonny and Cher's 'I got you babe' as it has every morning. At this point, every viewer who wants Rita to still be there must realize at some level that they have come to like Phil. And as the camera pans across the bed it reveals Rita, under

the covers but still clothed. She reminds Phil that he fell asleep before any sex might have happened, and recalls the auction – ‘I bought you; I own you’. Having assured himself that at last the cycle of repetition is broken, Phil asks, ‘What can I do for you today?’ After Rita’s jokey response, the film cuts to an exterior shot of the house. Phil and Rita appear in the doorway and walk down the garden path towards a gateway whitened by snow. ‘It’s beautiful. Let’s live here’ says Phil. They kiss, and he concludes ‘We’ll rent to start’. The camera pulls away as the pair walk under the gateway, and the cloud footage of the opening titles reappears. The end is marked by Nat King Cole singing ‘Almost like being in love’. Just before the credits roll, Cole is replaced by the song especially written for the film by George Fenton and Harold Ramis, ‘Weatherman’.

Earlier, during his attempt to seduce Rita, Phil has asked her what she wants in a man. She replies with a list of characteristics which amount to a nice girl’s definition of a New Man. The most radical attributes of this ideal are that ‘he cries in front of me’, ‘he changes poopy diapers’, and ‘he loves his mother’. At the time, playing his egotistical self, Phil is sceptical. After the first he interjects ‘This is a *man* we’re talking about?’, after the second he asks ‘But does he have to say “poopy”?’ He does not respond to the third.

Rita’s ideal man has given up neither male privileges nor power. Yet, weak and clichéd as her demands are, even by the end of the film Phil has not demonstrated a willingness to fulfil them. It may be difficult to demonstrate the second and third qualities outlined above given the time available, but so far as crying in front of her is concerned, he scores very low. In the end he does not share with Rita what is presumably the most emotionally draining experience of his life – his ordeal of the repeated day.¹³ She remains ignorant of this at the close of the film, and Phil’s renarration of their relationship as a straightforward story where the love of a good woman helps a bad guy to reform is allowed to stand. Still more significantly, he has not learned to appreciate anything in Rita more than the most traditional, clichéd attributes of femininity. ‘You’re the kindest, prettiest, sweetest person I’ve ever met in my life’, he intones to her dozing face at the end of the night before. Phil’s retention of traditional masculine prerogatives is demonstrated in the final dialogue, when he assumes responsibility for where they are going to live. The choice to remain in Punxsutawney, like Prendergast’s decision to remain in the police force at the end of *Falling Down*, bespeaks a middle-class ideology of free will where economics can be left unconsidered. It is also a refusal to take back to the big city the regenerated/redefined roles that have been so hard won in the repeated small-town day. It is not hard to see why they are non-transferable.

In *Groundhog Day*, then, masculinity is questioned and remoulded (a little) but only through suspending and rewriting economic realities, only within the bounds of a small-town setting and a repeated time

¹³ In the last of his failed attempts at seduction, Phil does explain the repeating day to Rita, but she experiences only one day, she has no memory of this in the closing scenes, and in a sense, it has not happened to her.

frame, and only by reference to a self-consciously old-fashioned standard. In fact the temporal framing of the film is quite sophisticated, with quotations from 1950s music and film, most notably the semi-ironic references to Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* in the closing scene. Particularly neat is the way in which the film's theme song 'Weatherman' is used during the closing titles to bracket Nat King Cole, who is cut off in mid-flow: surely a happy coincidence with marketing exigencies.

We are left, then, with a deeply ironic sense of *Falling Down* and *Groundhog Day*. While they are both in some senses critical of the white middle-class masculinity which has occupied the default position in mainstream US culture, they reinforce the primacy of white males in making sense of, and responding to, a perceived crisis. Here, when white masculinity seems most under fire, it still hogs the ground. Through their invocations of Los Angeles, these films position themselves at a moment of crisis in US history, and make connections between this crisis and trouble with white masculinity. Thus, they both set themselves up as critical of certain elements in white patriarchal US history, yet ultimately reconfirm the primacy of such narratives. It is not just that they fail to displace a white male middle-class subjectivity. Produced after the 1992 Los Angeles riots, they leave intact, and add strength to, a white, patriarchal discourse of crisis itself.

Both *Falling Down* and *Groundhog Day* take the moment of crisis for granted, and narrativize male responses to a historical moment. As a result, the construction of crisis itself is rarely presented in either film as something that can be contested. In fact the discourse of crisis frames these narratives so rigidly that it is difficult even to discuss them without also leaving it uncontested. Most of what I have said so far leaves this problem unresolved, and I will now concentrate on an episode in *Falling Down* which engages explicitly with redefining US history, and thereby presents that history as contestable. In doing so, I want to move towards a conclusion by specifying the positions from which history and 'crisis' are constructed in what was a very popular film widely reviewed as particularly symptomatic or revelatory of its moment.

Having left his car on the highway, it will be remembered, D-FENS goes into a shop to get change for the telephone. The Korean shopkeeper refuses, demanding that he buy something. He selects a can of Coke, but he regards its price – eighty-five cents – as exorbitant. Since this would leave him still without change for the telephone, D-FENS suggests that fifty cents would be a fairer price. This would still be over the odds, but the shopkeeper refuses. The episode features a series of memorable images: D-FENS cooling his forehead with a can of Coca Cola fresh from the refrigerator, his wresting control of the Korean's baseball bat, his smashing up display after display with the bat, his triumphant exit. What I want to focus on

here is some of the dialogue, in which D-FENS explicitly tries to rewrite American economic history. Faced with a demand of eighty-five cents for a can of coke, D-FENS accuses the Korean of theft, and wields the baseball bat yelling ‘I’m just standing up for my rights as a consumer’. He goes on, ‘Let’s roll back prices to 1965 – what do you think of that?’, and attempts to force the shopkeeper to return his prices to a pre-inflationary level. Methodically, D-FENS selects several commodities in turn – a pack of six doughnuts, a box of aspirin, a package of four AA batteries – and asks the Korean for a price. If the price is too high, he smashes up the merchandise with the bat. When he gets to the batteries, the shopkeeper is terrified into hazarding a price more to D-FENS liking, and he finally agrees on fifty cents for the coke. In these actions, D-FENS crystallizes and resolves the anxieties of many Americans, if not the majority of the first world. It is the particularity of this crystallization that I will now investigate.

Primarily, the scene offers an explanation for the angst with which consumers face rising prices. Here inflation is defined as profiteering. The scene suggests that it is the shopkeeper’s greed that is responsible for his high prices, not the extra costs necessitated by the position and volume of his business, and that he has the capacity (under duress) to rectify the situation. Thus, symbolically, the USA’s economic problems (which actuate the narrative of *Falling Down*, in as far as they are responsible for Foster’s being laid off) are a matter of personal wrongdoing rather than historical conditions, and wrongdoing by immigrants at that. In this sense the film does articulate the anti-Asian prejudice of which it was accused, and which has in turn been given a major role in some narratives of the 1992 riots.

The scene almost cries out for symbolic exegesis. D-FENS might stand here for what could be perceived as US national self-interest. His demand to pay fair prices might be related to the US government’s continuing engagement with GATT talks (taking place during the film’s production and distribution). His use of force to guarantee control of commodity prices might echo for some the Gulf War, attacked by some US radicals as motivated by a desire to keep oil prices low. But these interpretations fail to come to terms with the audience empathy generated by D-FENS’s self-proclaimed status as a consumer. Instead then I want to refocus the scene by investigating the significations of D-FENS as consumer and the commodity he purchases. Here, as nowhere else in the film, he has most claim to the status of ‘neighbour/everyday guy/ordinary man’ claimed for him in the film’s publicity.¹⁴ More specifically, a covert alliance is made here between white and black consumers, with D-FENS figuring what was presented in the media as a central cause of the Los Angeles riots – the resentment felt by inner-city blacks against ‘profiteering’ shopkeepers, often, and stereotypically, Asian. This initiates a white-black bond consonant with the racial politics of the film as outlined

¹⁴ See Schumacher in *Empire* (July 1993); voiceover of the trailer shown in Britain; caption of *Falling Down* advertisement poster.

earlier, and cemented by D-FENS's relationship with the black protester. At the same time, Asianness is constructed as otherness, which lays the basis for the negativizing Vietnam references of the last third of the film, as described earlier. In these ways, *Falling Down* stages race relations through its narrative and its subject positioning, with blacks joining whites in the privileged circle of centred subjectivity (even at the cost of 'economic viability', with Asians still firmly objectified, and with hispanics left in no-man's (gang)land.¹⁵ If this is a contemporary mutation of US ideology, consumer demand remains a driving force – Schumacher's comment, with which I began, can be read as an attempt to engage an audience comprising whites and blacks. I will close by considering the symbolic role played by a commodity, Coca Cola, in cementing this alliance.

Although angry about the inflated prices of all the commodities in the store, it is the Coke that causes D-FENS to blow his top. I would argue that the reason for this is that he thinks he knows Coke, and he expects to pay a regular price for it anywhere. Coke advertising, until a major sea change in 1993, has emphasized its dependability, its sameness, and its capacity to symbolically unite people of all ages, races and creeds. As such, Coke stands for the universalization of Americanness and American culture, and at the same time it puts a happy face on US global economic prominence. But in the convenience store, D-FENS is faced with 'foreign' control over this most American of commodities. This can be read as figuring racial and corporate fears of Asian financial power, but more powerfully, the scene articulates consumer anxieties which are universal.

The scene thus makes available several readings. Rightwing responses may focus responsibility for economic problems on ethnic groups within the USA and/or on challenges to US global economic power. A liberal reading of the scene will accept the covert racism symbolized by the alien appropriation of Coke, even though it might reject the surface anti-Asian racism of the scene and eschew D-FENS's violent reaction. The ideological closure of the scene can be broken, though, if the Coke can is regarded with the same particularity as the Korean shopkeeper. We must ask why, if eighty-five cents for a Coke leaves him with insufficient change for the telephone, does Foster not simply choose a cheaper alternative?

Of course the direct answer to this question is that if he had, the rest of the film would not happen. Yet the scene must nevertheless retain narrative credibility, and in any case, one of the most significant aspects of the scene is precisely that the question seldom occurs to viewers. Perhaps due to the exigencies of product placement, the possibility of an alternative does not arise. No other brands of drink are even shown. This is a real inconsistency, since D-FENS is making a purchase solely in order to get change for the telephone, and not choosing a particular brand for any specific qualities. It is a measure of the symbolic power of Coke that viewers probably never register

¹⁵ In this, *Falling Down* echoes similar accommodations between white and black males staged in many Hollywood films from the late 1980s on, such as the three *Lethal Weapon* films, especially *Lethal Weapon 2* (Richard Donner, 1989), and Lawrence Kasdan's *Grand Canyon* (1991).

the possibility either. However, when we ask this question some cracks in the ideology of personal freedom begin to appear. What really angers D-FENS is not the restriction of consumer choice, but being asked to pay more than the regular price for a regular Coke. He is in several senses an advertiser's dream. To start with, he does not choose Coke, he simply is not aware of any alternative. Not only that but, as I have shown, here Coke overtly signifies freedom and economic justice while covertly signifying an equivalence between white and black, thus linking the two at a level so deep it probably does not consciously register with the audience, and is all the more powerful for this. But it is for precisely these reasons that in the last analysis *Falling Down* constructs the tensions of a depression-hit, gender-split, multicultural America in terms of the marketing strategies of a registered company, albeit one of global scale.

In this article I have tried to trace the implications of the figuring of an American cultural crisis in terms of a crisis of white masculinity. Largely, both the construction of such crises, and their potential resolution by reference to regenerative masculinity, serve to reinforce patriarchal hierarchies. I have also contended that such an enterprise must pay attention to codes of ethnicity, which under the pressure of multiculturalism undermine binary constructions of identity. In this context, both *Groundhog Day* and *Falling Down* seem to look backwards, the former in its nostalgia, the latter through its Fiedleresque confrontations between males. Yet the form of *Falling Down* does not ultimately hold in check either the secret truth of economics, nor the 'third term' of non-white, non-African ethnicity. And this in spite of its refusal to portray a global 'American' identity in terms like those of the 1993 advertising of 'Asian Coke', 'Grandma's Coke', and the rest.

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Questioning totalities: constructions of masculinity in the popular Greek cinema of the 1960s

DIMITRIS ELEFTHERIOTIS

This paper concentrates on a very specific problem with which I was confronted while teaching Film Studies in Greece, namely how to translate the well-established lecture/seminar topic ‘The construction of masculinity in cinema’ into ‘The construction of masculinity in Greek cinema’. The translation is more or less impossible; the ‘masculinity’ described by Anglo-US film theory has very little in common with the kinds of ‘masculinity’ that one encounters in the Greek films of the 1960s. A number of different explanations for this incompatibility appeared to me at different stages. It is worth considering some of them, not as personal anecdotes but as possible positions in a very complex field of power relations:

– ‘Greek cinema is not good enough; it never achieves the formal perfection of Hollywood, the aesthetic experimentation of the avant garde or the political engagement of the Third Cinema. It cannot really be approached by what is after all a sophisticated theory that addresses a sophisticated subject.’ In spite of its apparent naivete, there is some persuasive force in this argument given that Film Studies almost exclusively concentrates on three categories of films: ‘art’ (usually European or US), ‘political’ (divided into US/European and ‘other’) and ‘popular’ (almost exclusively Anglo-US). Clearly this does not imply that all other films are bad but it does suggest quite strongly that these are the films worth studying. The fact that very few Greek

¹ See the debates presented in Yiannis Soldatos, *History of the Greek Cinema*, vols 1–3. (Athens: Aigokeros, 1988/89/90).

intellectuals consider the popular Greek cinema worth studying is a testimony to the power of the canon.¹

— Another response is to question the theoretical flexibility of my teaching. Given the incommensurability of film theory with the object of study at hand ('The construction of masculinity in Greek cinema') there are two options: either give up Greek cinema as an object of study or look for other, more relevant, theoretical discourses (for example ethnography or the study of Greek popular culture). Both options involve a break: either with film theory or with Greek cinema.

— A more promising possibility is to turn the critical eye on film theory itself. On a pragmatic, cynical level, this is the only position that leads to the presentation of a paper rather than frustration, despair and pessimism. On a theoretical and political level, it aligns itself with postcolonial critiques and the most engaged forms of postmodernism.

'The construction of masculinity in cinema' as a discursive category within film theory must be exposed to an investigation of its limits and limitations. I realize that in doing so I am in danger of imposing an imaginary unity on a discourse which is increasingly marked by diversity. I feel, nevertheless, that theorizations of masculinity in Anglo-US Film Studies have certain common characteristics: they revolve around a type of masculinity posited as dominant which is explained in psychoanalytic terms and pertains to the rather vague category 'mainstream' cinema.

Laura Mulvey's article on 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema'² was the starting point in analyses of representations of men and women and constructions of feminine and masculine roles in Hollywood films. Theorizations of 'difference'³ were equally important, especially in terms of foregrounding the phallocentrism of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Articles on masculinity started appearing in the early 1980s in the pages of *Screen*, *Camera Obscura*, *Wide Angle* and *Framework*.⁴ Steve Neale's 'Masculinity as spectacle',⁵ published in 1983, became the standard text in teaching masculinity. In most of these articles the construction of masculinity is accounted for in terms of textual practices and subject positions structured around the 'gaze' or the 'look' through processes of 'narcissistic' or 'fetishistic' identification. Masculinity and male spectatorship are analysed in terms of psychoanalytic processes and film semiotics. In spite of constant reference to historical, social and cultural specificities as well as class, race, and ethnicity, very rarely are these categories actually addressed (the notable exception is Richard Dyer's work on 'Male pin-ups' and 'Whiteness').⁶ It is rather surprising how little work has appeared in *Screen* since 1983 dealing directly with constructions of masculinity (I can only think of Barbara Creed's article on male hysteria).⁷ Important work has been produced around studies of

² Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975), pp. 6–18 and 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema inspired by *Duel in the Sun*', *Framework*, nos 15–17 (1981).

³ Stephen Heath, 'Difference', *Screen*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1978); D. N. Rodowick, 'The difficulty of difference', *Wide Angle*, vol. 5, no. 1; Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire: Women's Sexuality Today* (London: Paladin, 1984); Alice Jardine, *Gynesis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (eds.), *Men in Feminism* (London: Methuen, 1987).

⁴ Pam Cook, 'Masculinity in crisis'; Steve Neale, 'Chariots of Fire, images of men'; Richard Dyer, 'The male pin-up'; John Caughey and Gillian Skirrow, 'Abab Ismagel ... and Mo', all in *Screen*, vol. 23, nos 3–4 (1982); Steve Neale, 'Masculinity as spectacle', *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 6 (1983).

Paul Willemen, 'Anthony Mann: looking at the male', *Framework*, nos 15/16/17 (1981).

⁵ Neale, 'Masculinity as spectacle'.

⁶ Richard Dyer, 'The male pin-up' and 'Whiteness', *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 4 (1988).

⁷ Barbara Creed, 'Phallic panic: male hysteria and *Dead Ringers*', *Screen*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1990), pp. 125–46.

individual stars and representations of homosexuality but in terms of heterosexual masculinity in mainstream cinema, Neale's approach remains largely unchallenged.

The masculinity thus identified is characterized by the central position occupied by notions of control, power, aggression, domination, emotional poverty, the preoccupation with order and mastery and a resistance to looks that objectify and eroticize the male body. There are a number of problems around this description of masculinity and most importantly around its singularity: what is the status of this, textually produced and psychoanalytically explained, masculinity?; how does it relate to socially constructed and lived masculinities (real men in the real world – a relationship equally problematic as the one between subject and social subject)?; are we to understand it as an 'ideal' construction, a 'dominant' or 'hegemonic' representation?;⁸ and if this is the case what are the parameters of this 'domination' and what is the terrain of this 'hegemony'? 'Reflections on men and mainstream cinema' is the subtitle of Neale's essay. 'Mainstream cinema' is, nevertheless, a notoriously slippery category – its aesthetic, historical and, importantly for this paper, geographical boundaries escaping definitions. Significantly, in Neale's essay the term is interchangeable with 'classical Hollywood film', 'the cinematic institution', 'narrative film' or even just 'cinema'! In terms of geography, what is usually meant by 'mainstream' are films produced in North America and certain parts of Europe and Australia; this leaves films that are produced elsewhere and attract big audiences in their own or other countries in a deeply ambiguous state. Too popular in certain places to be called anything else but mainstream, and too eccentric elsewhere to be considered either mainstream or art movies, this not only leaves them untheorized in Anglo-US Film Studies but also relegates them to the ontological and epistemological status of 'other cinemas'.⁹

8 Steve Neale talks about 'ideal masculinity', whereas Kaja Silverman in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992) proposes a 'dominant fiction' that produces 'exemplary masculinity'; 'hegemonic masculinity' is proposed by, among others, Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne in 'Dislocating masculinity: gender, power and anthropology' in Cornwall and Lindisfarne (eds), *Dislocating Masculinity: Comparative Ethnographies* (London: Routledge, 1994), to 'encourage a consideration of how power is related to attributions of masculinity' and [how] such dominant constructions determine the standards against which other masculinities are defined' (p. 20).

9 See Teshome H. Gabriel, 'Teaching third world cinema', *Screen*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1983); and Julianne Burton, 'Marginal cinemas and mainstream critical theory', *Screen*, vol. 26, nos 3–4 (1985).

In what follows, I will suggest some ways in which the construction of dominant masculinities can be explained and located within a historical, political and sociocultural context.

Other constructions

How can a very specific kind of masculinity (the dominant masculinity described by Neale and others) evident in a very specific sociocultural, textual and historical context ('Mainstream cinema') be explained by such a universal discourse as psychoanalysis? Is it not a theoretical and political paradox that a discourse dedicated to the exploration of the psychic processes and structurations of the whole of humankind is used to produce knowledge of a very limited object? The feminist critique of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis has very efficiently and convincingly exposed its masculinist bias and has called attention

to a ‘remarkable oversight’, the complete lack of theorization of female sexuality. The phallocentrism of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis has been repeatedly exposed but its Eurocentricism (a term somewhat problematic in itself as I will discuss later) remains more or less unchallenged.

In an ambitious work that seeks to investigate the margins of male subjectivity, Kaja Silverman suggests that ‘Our entire “world” . . . depends upon the alignment of phallus and penis’.¹⁰ From her psychoanalytic perspective the ‘world’ shrinks very fast, as the marginal masculinities that she explores are firmly located within western modernity: Hollywood cinema of the 1940s, the films of Fassbinder, the writings of Proust and ‘Lawrence of Arabia’, whose colonialist adventures define not only the geographical margins of Silverman’s world but also the geopolitical limits of the psychoanalytic discourse. This restriction of the exploration of marginal masculinities within the geographical and historical boundaries of western modernity is not yet another ‘oversight’ but the logical outcome of a methodology that theorizes dominant masculinity as universal.

The preoccupation with order, power, control, mastery and domination attributed to dominant masculinity can be explained in terms of historically and culturally specific processes and discourses that define western modernity:

- the Enlightenment in which the centrality of universal truth and reason is characteristic of the all-knowing, all-conquering (male) subject;
- the primacy of vision effected by Renaissance perspectival systems which establishes an ordering, controlling, unified (male) subject who masters and objectifies the ‘world’ – closely related to this is the production of ‘global’ representations which order the world from a European perspective and through cartography deliver the world as a unified field to be explored and exploited;
- the Industrial Revolution and Modernization as processes that entail a domination of the physical world and its resources and the control of its forces;
- and, finally, colonialism as the violent imposition of power which establishes the colonialist (male) subject as the master of the world.

A very specific form of (male) subjectivity emerges from such processes and discourses which, as Foucault points out,¹¹ is inextricably linked with the figure of the Other as its boundary and inverted mirror. Analyses of masculinity that universalize the dominant form of male subjectivity are normative and totalizing. Recent work within postcolonial theory, feminism and ethnography emphasizes both the need to understand masculinity in its multiplicity and the limitations of psychoanalytic approaches. A shift in focus is suggested from the universal to the local as studies of masculinity

¹⁰ Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, p. 16.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1970).

¹² K. Davis and J. Oldersma in K. Davis et al. (eds), *The Gender of Power*, (London: Sage, 1991); Cornwall and Lindisfarne (eds), *Dislocating Masculinity*; Rowena Chapman and Jonathan Rutherford (eds), *Male Order*. *Unwrapping Masculinity* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1988); Jeff Hearn and David Morgan (eds), *Men, Masculinities and Social Theory* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990); Pat Caplan (ed.), *The Sexual Construction of Sexuality* (London: Tavistock, 1987); Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys. Adventures in a Man's World* (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1991); Michael Roper and John Tosh (eds), *Manful Assertions. Masculinities in Britain Since 1800* (London: Routledge, 1991).

¹³ Antoine Compagnon, 'Mapping the European mind', in Duncan Petrie (ed.), *Screening Europe* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), p. 113.

¹⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

¹⁵ Mary-Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

concentrate on 'an investigation of power in concrete practices/ contexts of men and women'¹² rather than the 'eternal' and 'universal' workings and reworkings of Oedipal traumas or the various versions of the alignment of the penis and the phallus.

It is the political contention of this paper that dominant masculinity must be understood as inextricably linked to very specific historical, cultural and political processes. Passing it off as universal and eternal not only naturalizes and essentializes gender difference but also conceals important relations of domination and power.

Returning to 'The constructions of masculinity in Greek cinema', my argument is that the rarity of representations of masculinity in its dominant, western form should not be understood in terms of a failure of Greek culture to align the penis and the phallus or (like our ancestors) to resolve the Oedipus complex but in terms of its exclusion from the processes and discourses that define western modernity and the concomitant forms of male subjectivity that emerge through and in them. Greece is positioned in the in-between zone of the imaginary East/West polarity not only in terms of geography but also historically, economically and socioculturally. Of course Greece is not alone in this ambiguous position: for many people 'Europe', as Antoine Compagnon has suggested, is in itself an imaginary unity 'present everywhere and yet invisible . . . (its) circumference everywhere and the centre nowhere'.¹³

The rejection of such 'God-like' unity is crucial for an understanding of power relations within Europe and globally. The tactical political use of terms such as 'Eurocentricism' should not obscure important historical, political and cultural differences: the colonization, for instance, of the Balkans by European and non-European powers or the exoticization (along the lines of orientalism as explored by Said)¹⁴ of southern and eastern Europe in nineteenth-century travel writing¹⁵ and, indeed, twentieth-century films, such as *Shirley Valentine* (Lewis Gilbert, 1989).

Other masculinities, other cinemas

What is surprising about analyses of masculinity such as Neale's and Silverman's is their blindness to issues of race. Trapped within their psychoanalytic method they are unable to theorize masculinity in its relational dimension, as a construction that revolves around a complex network of power relations. In Neale's article Charlton Heston, Clint Eastwood and Kirk Douglas are proposed as prime examples of a dominant masculinity that characterizes mainstream cinema – but there is no reference to the Arabs that Heston conquers in *El Cid*, to the black gladiator Douglas fights in the still from *Spartacus* that illustrates the article, to the 'Bad', the 'Ugly' or the Mexicans that Eastwood dominates in his Westerns. These other masculinities

textually produced as ‘subordinated’ in mainstream cinema remain outside the discourse of film theory and they are *de facto* subordinated as objects of study in a position very much like that of other cinemas.

In order to analyse the types of masculinity constructed in/by the popular Greek cinema of the 1960s we need some grasp of the institutional, cultural and historical context of their production. In terms of popularity, the 1960s is beyond doubt the most significant period in the history of Greek cinema: by the middle of the decade the annual turnover of films produced in Greece was well over one hundred, making it (together with Italy and France) one of the leading European countries in terms of film production. Facing a restricted market due to a lack of export possibilities and the competition from imported films, the Greek film industry relied on two factors for its survival: extremely low production costs (the average cost of a film in the mid 1960s was the equivalent to \$30,000) and huge popularity (in 1967 there were 500 open air cinemas in Athens [population of 1.5 million] which in the four months of the summer season sold more than thirty-one million tickets, the vast majority of which were for Greek films!).

Two important factors contributed to both the low cost and the popularity of Greek films: a very limited range of genres (comedies and melodramas account for ninety per cent of all the films produced in the 1960s) and the absence of a Hollywood-style star system (there were no mega-stars, but instead a group of twenty to thirty leading actors impersonating the same types again and again – they more or less ‘played themselves’ – usually with five or six sharing top billing). Unable to compete with foreign films in terms of production values, the Greek industry relied on the familiarity of the characters and the ‘Greekness’ of the diegetic world of the films.

The last point is significant for this article. Hollywood aspires to be a global cinema, institutionally, economically, culturally and aesthetically, not only by dominating the world market but also in terms of the universal character of its films, a diegetic world which encompasses the whole of the planet (from *Macao* to *Khartoum*, from *One Million Years BC* to *2010*) and which goes hand-in-hand with the confidence that its settings, characters, stories, values and emotions have universal currency.

In sharp contrast, the popular Greek films of the 1960s are domestic in all senses of the word. They are made for domestic consumption, set in a domestic setting (never outside Greece) and are usually about domesticity – the troubles and the pleasures of life within the extensive network of family, friends and neighbours, in the domestic settings of the household and the neighbourhood.

Masculinity in Greek films of the 1960s unfolds and operates in this restricted domestic scene. ‘Being male’ involves a negotiation of the position that a man occupies in the domestic sphere, the extensive family and the omnipresent neighbourhood. This is unlike the

dominant masculinity described by Neale et al. in two important ways: Firstly, Greek men do not seek to prove their masculinity by exercising control and domination over the public and private spheres but by searching for a place within the complex network of interaction, support and competition that makes up the diegetic world of the films. This place is not a place of uncontested patriarchal supremacy and control but an ambiguous, in-between area determined by the need to survive, to find protection from a threatening outside world, to cope with the material and psychological demands of social life. Secondly, the main narrative drive in these films is the desire to find such a place. This never takes the form of a heroic quest but is usually facilitated or hindered by uncontrollable external forces: *deus ex machina* narrative devices that take the form of a win in a lottery, an unexpected inheritance, a rich uncle from America, an accident, an illness or even divine intervention in the form of a miracle. A peculiar form of personal development often accompanies the workings of luck or fate; the characters have to develop the crucial skills of flexibility and interdependence rather than the traits of a principled, dominating and masterful masculinity.

‘Finding-a-place’ is indeed the main preoccupation of the male characters in Greek films of the 1960s. It is necessitated by two different ontological states that define at the same time two kinds of masculinity: ‘not-having-a-place’ in melodramas and ‘not-knowing-your-place’ in comedies. I want briefly to discuss two popular stars who are good examples of these two types of masculinity: the comedian Kostas Voutsas and the melodrama actor and singer Nicos Xanthopoulos. I will limit my analysis to the main characteristics which make these types different from the dominant definitions of masculinity.

Xanthopoulos was widely known as the ‘son of the people’. This characterization, coined by scornful film critics, encapsulates the most important aspects of his star image and the masculinity he represents. Firstly, it indicates the incredible popularity of his films and his songs: his appeal to Greek working-class families was phenomenal and based on the simplicity,直率 and commonness of the characters that he played. Secondly, it accurately defines his not-having-a-place status, typically being outside a family (either because he is an orphan or because his parents deserted him) with the narrative revolving around his quest for a new extensive family to provide him with the love, security and support that his life so sadly lacks. Finally, it describes the emotional appeal and impact that he had on his audience: recognition of and identification with his problems, compassion for his plight, and the desire to foster him, to make him their son.

The dominant masculinity, Neale argues, ‘is one marked not only by emotional reticence, but also by silence, a reticence with language’.¹⁶ Xanthopoulos talks excessively about his emotions, sings

¹⁶ Neale, ‘Masculinity as spectacle’, p. 7.

his sadness at every opportunity and cries a lot. His masculinity is challenged but also celebrated by his emotional openness: 'can someone tell me, can somebody let me know, is it shameful for a man to cry?' he sings in one of his films – the question is, nevertheless, purely rhetorical, his masculinity is beyond doubt, as genuine as his tears. Indeed one of the main attractions of Xanthopoulos's movies is the spectacle of him externalizing his emotions: closeups of his tearful eyes or his sad face, musical numbers totally structured around his heart-breaking singing. In sharp opposition to the spectacle of masculinity that Neale describes, 'we see male bodies stylised and fragmented by close-ups, but our look is not direct, it is heavily mediated by the looks of the characters involved... and those looks are marked not by desire, but rather by fear, or hatred, or aggression'.¹⁷

17 Ibid., p. 14.

Emotional reticence has been posited as a universal condition of masculinity. This is seriously challenged by constructions of masculinity such as Xanthopoulos's – a point that in a different context, Kobena Mercer makes very forcefully: 'How could you say that black men like Miles Davis or Michael Jackson, James Brown or John Coltrane are "emotionally illiterate".... This conceals a dangerously Eurocentric assumption which demonstrates gross insensitivity to the different ways in which emotions are expressed in different cultures.'¹⁸ Here again, we are forced to question both the universalism of psychoanalytic discourses of masculinity and the descriptive accuracy of the term 'Eurocentrism'.

Kostas Voutsas, a star very much admired by the critics for his acting ability but not for the characters that he played, was seen as a perfect impersonation of the 'average', typical Greek: a pleasant but

18 Kobena Mercer, 'Racism and the politics of masculinity', in Chapman and Rutherford (eds), *Male Order*, p. 122.



Constantly lost in fantasies of grandeur – Kostas Voutsas in *A Pennitissa Onassis* (Kostas Karagiannis, 1995)

naive, good-hearted but cowardly, baby-faced man, constantly lost in fantasies of *grandeur*, of becoming a millionaire, a famous footballer, an Arab prince, a pop or a film star, the tough man of the neighbourhood, an aristocratic playboy. In most of his films (which despite their playfulness are clearly didactic and moralistic), it is precisely this day-dreaming that gets him into trouble. Losing perspective of his average abilities, his comfortable but undistinguished place in society, in the pursuit of an impossible ideal ego he very quickly becomes its inverted opposite: his shortcomings are foregrounded and he is openly ridiculed as a failure by his family and friends. He regains their esteem by realizing his limitations and by rejecting fantasies of a ‘more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego’. He reclaims happiness from a safe, non-heroic position, a place marked as in between two extremes: an omnipotent, unattainable position of perfect control, total mastery and unlimited power over others, and its symmetrical opposite, an undesirable position of complete helplessness and lack of power marked by social and emotional alienation. ‘Not-knowing-your-place’ is what puts into motion this narrative oscillation around the average position, the proper place, and at the same time circumscribes the limits of ‘average’ Greek masculinity in cinema.

Narcissistic fantasies of domination, power and control are doubly negated in the films of Voutsas: on the one hand, the fantasy itself is disavowed as the main source of unhappiness and suffering and, on the other, the object of the fantasy, the ideal ego that Voutsas pursues, is deconstructed, usually exposed as either false or faulty, as either a mythological creation, a phoney exterior that hides nothing else but an ordinary man, or as a very unlikeable individual, arrogant, heartless and possessive. Knowing-your-place as a way of being male in the films of Voutsas involves a very emphatic negation of the omnipotent masculinity described by Neale as dominant.

My criticism of ‘The construction of masculinity’ as a discursive category within Film Studies focuses on its non-historical, universalistic nature. Positing a dominant masculinity as the pivotal, privileged category has significant implications. As Tosh and Roper, among others, have argued, ‘dominant or “hegemonic” masculinities function by asserting their superiority over the “other”, whether that be gay men, younger men, women, or subordinated ethnic groups’,¹⁹ and not to treat masculinity in relational terms is to leave untheorized key power relations and structures. Similarly, by removing the emergence of dominant male subjectivity from its historical and sociocultural context, psychoanalytic approaches leave key political issues untouched. As Mercer has argued: ‘While prevailing definitions of masculinity imply power, control and authority, these attributes have been historically denied to black men since slavery. The centrally

¹⁹ Roper and Tosh (eds), *Manful Assertions*, p. 13.

²⁰ Mercer, 'Racism and the politics of masculinity', p. 112.

dominant role of the white male slave-master in the 18th and 19th century plantation society debarred black males from the patriarchal privileges ascribed to the masculine role.'²⁰

A similar, though clearly not identical, problem arises in the study of 'The construction of masculinity in Greek cinema'. The two types discussed in this paper can only be understood in the historically and culturally specific context in which they surface. The enormous value placed on finding a masculine position in which survival and happiness are possible can be explained in terms of the ambiguous, uncomfortable place occupied by Greece in relation to the powerful processes and events that constitute western modernity. It can also be seen as reflecting an anxiety similar to that experienced by the very institution in which these masculinities emerged, namely the Greek film industry which struggled for a position of financial survival within a restricted market.

The two types of masculinity I have discussed are not the only ones encountered in Greek cinema or Greek society. I am not suggesting that these masculinities escape power relations – on the contrary, structures of male domination are built around them – but in order to understand their modality and subvert their course it is necessary to locate them in their appropriate cultural and historical context. This clearly entails the rigorous questioning of the totalizing, universal nature of the discursive category 'dominant masculinity'.

Were we being served? Homosexual representation in popular British comedy

MURRAY HEALY

Is Mr Wilberforce Humphries, of *Are You Being Served?*, offensive? At the very point in history when the Gay Liberation Front was contesting effeminate stereotypes of male homosexuals, the smiling sales assistant, ever ready to whip out his tape measure, go down on his knees and measure up any browsing male customer, minced into Grace Brothers' menswear department with a cry of 'I'm free!'. The character was condemned by gay men as yet another comic spectacle for the heterosexual audience. Many gay rights activists involved in projects to establish 'positive role models' cite Mr Humphries as the most hated figure in their gallery of negative stereotypes, which usually includes the likes of Frankie Howerd, Larry Grayson, Charles Hawtrey, and so on.

I grew up with Mr Humphries and laughed at him as a child. Now, as an enlightened, politicized gay man, aware of all the debates on the politics of representation and the oppression of marginal identities, I still find that, watching re-runs of *Are You Being Served?* (a highly popular BBC sitcom, written by Jeremy Lloyd and David Croft, which started in 1973), the camp character strikes me as triumphant rather than oppressive or victimized. I suspect the condemnation of the character, albeit understandable in the early 1970s, was motivated by fears of effeminacy; however, this condemnation continues, even amongst my contemporaries. I think it is time to reexamine this case of alleged 'cultural misrepresentation'. If such comedy is so homophobically oppressive, why is it so successfully camp?

1 Most *Carry On* films mentioned here were produced by the team of dir. Gerald Thomas, prod. Peter Rogers, and scr. Talbot Rothwell. Exceptions include *Nurse*, *Constable*, *Cruising*, *Teacher* and *Regardless* (scr. Norman Hudis) and *Sergeant* (scr. Norman Hudis and John Antrobus).

I disagree with the largely undisputed assumption that all queer characters in popular comedy of the 1960s and 1970s functioned solely as figures of heterosexist containment, marginalizing homosexual identity through derision. To dismiss, for example, Charles Hawtrey's rendition of Dan Dan the Lavatory Man in *Carry On Screaming* (1966)¹ as an oppressive, fixed stereotype is to ignore the fact that the comic queer was a shifting cultural construct highly sensitive to changing social anxieties around homosexuality and sexual knowledge. By examining individual portrayals of queerness within their historical and textual contexts, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which the effeminate 'stereotype', far from being a closed demonization, was in fact constantly evolving, providing an ambivalent site of negotiation.

The fact that queer representations were most prevalent in comedy at this time is itself criticized as betraying the mainstream's desire to ridicule homosexuality. I would argue instead that comic structures provided a suitably ambivalent space to portray uncondemned queerness. Homosexuality was also being addressed in news and documentary features where judgement was unequivocal. It had to be: news media, as discourses of investigation and exposure, purport to reveal facts where there is no room for ambivalence. The 'truth' about homosexuality which journalists 'discovered' was that queers were sad lonely men who languished in a twilight world. In comedy, on the other hand, the dominant judgement may be implied, but cannot be so directly expressed; this would constrain the threat of disruptive anarchy which makes comedy funny.

Comic structures acknowledge the presence of the reader (for example, mechanically in the laughter track of sitcom). This safeguards a distance from what might be considered violent or disturbing action in a more realist narrative mode. Such reader-acknowledgement is also an invitation to engage, to play with linguistic and generic codes. A critical distance and an invitation to interpret accords each reader an agency which opens the availability of multiple discourses:

the comic is plural, unfinished, disseminative, dependent on context and the intertextuality of creator, text and contemplator. It is not, in other words, just the content of comedy that is significant but also its 'conspiratorial' relationship with the viewer (reader) . . . tragedy (and other noncomic forms) seeks to isolate or at least reduce the number of 'discourses' in order to imply a sense of 'fate' and inevitability as opposed to an awareness of potentiality and 'unfinalizedness'.²

It is precisely this 'unfinalizedness' (Mikhail Bakhtin's term) and ambivalence of comedy which opens a space in ideology where queers (and other dissident groups) can get in. As Neale and Krutnik have argued, 'All instances of the comic . . . are founded on the

2 Andrew S. Horton (ed.), *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 9–10.

³ Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 86.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁵ Horton, *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, p. 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

transgression of decorum and verisimilitude: on deviations from any social or aesthetic rule, norm, model, convention or law'.³ The comic can result in 'bad taste' and 'the transgression of more social taboos'.⁴ As a ludic 'subversion of norms',⁵ comedy can critique and even deconstruct dominant ideology; Horton argues that it can be positioned 'outside, around, and in opposition to the implied and stated norms of patriarchal society',⁶ and indeed heterosexual society.

To be sure, comedy is *licensed* to play with the limits of taste and so is allowed to represent the unacceptable, just as it plays with the limits of meaning and can create nonsense. The ideology of the reader is assumed to be in accord with the dominant, thus the reader can delineate the acceptable from the unacceptable, reinforcing the difference between the two. But not all readers conform to this assumed consensus. Even if *Carry On* movies and *Are You Being Served?* were homophobic in intent, they relied on the homophobia of the reader to reinscribe heterosexuality as 'natural' common sense and could not guarantee a unified, homophobic reading. Comedy cannot assume the safe transmission of an ideological message, even when it is explicitly articulated: 'a political viewpoint is always ambiguous or double-edged. What seems a radical leftist comedy to one generation may seem conservative and double-edged to another.'⁷ Jerry Palmer's structural analysis of comedy in *The Logic of the Absurd* 'underlines the "double" possibility of the comic as conservative or subversive or even both at once, depending on the audience and context'.⁸ In short, comedy, as an open and ambivalent structure, allows readers to swing both ways.

With its stress on the popular, the body and all those crude qualities which Stallybrass classifies as constituting the 'low-Other',⁹ *Carry On* movies are a prime example of Bakhtin's carnivalesque comedy.

Several factors indicate that they articulate a non- or even anti-bourgeois perspective: the centrality of working-class characters; their address and marketing to a broad, popular working-class audience; their unashamed celebration of the (low) body rather than the (high) mind as a source of humour (smut, not wit). Consequently, they were reviled by the middle-class establishment on grounds of prudish, political and intellectual snobbery as trash for the masses, fulfilling the function of 'low-Other' for the bourgeoisie: a distanced fantasy depiction of the working class as jovial, common, dirty and sexy (or at least sexual). The carnivalesque, as counterhegemonic disruptive space, may allow subversive expression and thus may offer a particularly open context for queer representation. Indeed, the gay triumphant/mocking attitude of carnival's 'multi-voicedness' (to use Bakhtin's term) is not unlike camp.

I am not suggesting, however, that all comic texts are open and ambivalent. Comedy is not a space to say anything: it is still subject to the censor. Particularly in representations of racial and gender identities, potentially transgressive readings are often foreclosed by

hegemonic structures (a feature of sitcom, as I shall discuss later). But because of the in/visibility of homosexuality, and the prevalent anxiety about the knowledge/ignorance of the audience on the subject, there was some room for negotiation in queer representation; indeed, it may have been manipulated by the actors themselves, if not by other members of the production teams. Within the carnivalesque context of the Carry On series, such factors mitigated against the successful closure to an exclusively heterosexist reading.

As carnivalesque texts, Carry On films address issues of sexuality somatically, rather than through bourgeois-sanctioned discourses of sex as either a procreative moral duty or an individual expression of love. Sensitivity to the class basis of sexual discourses also questions the assumption that the films held an old-fashioned view of sex, and that at their height in the swinging sixties they portrayed a redundant, prewar, dirty weekend, seaside postcard, sexual attitude. For not everyone was suddenly sexually liberated in the 1960s; such an epochal approach to history disregards the temporal overlap of attitudes, as well as the multitude of opinions, that exist at any one moment. Class difference, along with other factors (geography, age, race, gender), creates an overlapping and contradictory map of attitudes to sex in any one period. 1960s sexual ‘permissiveness’, as a discourse of self-conscious modernity (it was seen to be fashionable), youth, freedom and individuality, was very much a middle-class, arts-related, metropolitan phenomenon; Carry On, as a comment on tradition ('this is how it's always been'), middle age, familial obligation and collectivity, gave voice to a provincial, working-class perspective which, although hardly fashionable, was not as ridiculously anachronistic as it might seem to the middle-class viewer of the 1990s.

The 1950s and 1960s saw temporal and geographical overlappings of sexual knowledge and (mis)recognition, with varying notions of what was permissible, particularly across class, but with caution usually prevailing when it came to mass culture. Knowledge of sexuality, and particularly homosexuality, was seen as almost viral. This remains true to the present day. Throughout the last decade, mainstream news reports of AIDS and arguments against safer sex education programmes have been characterized by the notion that society can be contaminated by (knowledge of) perversion. So while news coverage of the Montagu-Wildeblood trials of 1954 and the Wolfenden report of 1957 certainly increased (heterosexual) public awareness of homosexuality, there was resistance to addressing the subject, particularly in the popular press.¹⁰ In 1952, the *Sunday Pictorial* finally ran a series of articles on gay men, marking the end of the ‘conspiracy of silence’ (a telling phrase, which Jeffrey Weeks attributes to the paper’s former editor, Hugh Cudlipp, who significantly referred to homosexuality as ‘a spreading fungus’). The series, called ‘Evil Men’, was about ‘“pansies” – mincing, effeminate

¹⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has analysed in detail the way such enforced silences and ignorances contribute to homophobic cultural projects. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 3–11.

¹¹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain* (London: Quartet Books, 1977), p. 162.

¹² Quoted in Weeks, *Coming Out*, p. 162.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

young men who call themselves queers. But simple decent folk regard them as freaks and rarities.¹² Jeffrey Weeks has commented, ‘But even after this . . . interest was generally expressed only when events forced the subject on them. During most of 1957, for instance, the *Daily Mirror* . . . never mentioned homosexuality at all.’¹³ Censorship and taste meant that the issue could rarely be dealt with directly; disapproval had to be expressed, but in such a way that it did not enlighten those not already aware of it. In calling for the privatization of sexuality, the Wolfenden Report was trying to render homosexuality and prostitution invisible to what it referred to as ‘the ordinary citizen’. However, according to the *Sunday Pictorial* feature, by 1952 most people knew there were ‘such things’, so it was time to begin a project of queer marginalization. Queerness has first to be represented before it can be demonized, but just how explicit that representation can be before it fails in its homophobic purpose, and starts to advertise something other, is hard to assess.

Carry On opened up space for a carnivalesque critique of dominant sexual discourse, and queers got in: Charles Hawtrey and Kenneth Williams were regular cast members right from the start. In the course of the Carry On films, the evolution of a camp gay ‘stereotype’ can be traced from a virtually unproblematic upper-class effete to a blatantly mincing queen.

The first film, *Carry On Sergeant* (1958) shows both Williams and Hawtrey in characteristically camp mode, but both their characters are upper class and I suspect this would have been read as an aspect of their poshness, not of their sexuality. Alan Sinfield demonstrates in *The Wilde Century* how effeminacy in the late nineteenth century was a mannerism associated with the aristocracy and the educated, becoming fused with the emerging figure of ‘the homosexual’ as a result of the Wilde trials.¹⁴ In the 1950s, effeminacy would not necessarily declare homosexuality. One has only to look at posh Walter the sissy in the *Beano*, the abject other to the working-class heroism embodied in Dennis the Menace, to see that he is not intended to be read as lustng after men. Even in 1971, *Carry On At Your Convenience* pitches Williams and Hawtrey as the power-wielding bourgeois characters (company owner W.C. Boggs and designer Coote) against the ‘simple decent folk’ on the shop floor. Effeminacy as a class-related rather than a sexuality-related mannerism may have helped to paper over the incongruities inherent in having Hawtrey, Williams and Howard camp it up while playing heterosexual parts. But when ‘pansies’ are helpfully defined in the popular press as mincing and effeminate, these characters become identifiable to more and more people as poofs, not toffs. Here is the dilemma, then – in these characters, homosexuality could be neither directly addressed nor ignored.

¹⁴ Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Movement* (London: Cassell, 1994).

Kenneth Williams as bourgeois company owner W.C. Beggs in *Carry On at Your Convenience* (1971). Picture courtesy: EFi Stills



It could equally well be argued that Rogers, Thomas and Rothwell were having a laugh at queers as it could that the queers in the cast were trying to foreground their sexuality in a climate of censorship (this may of course be a symbiotic dynamic). To pursue the second proposition, most of the *Carry On* regulars built on their image in the popular consciousness, performing to type and keeping their first names when in character (this became commonplace in the later films, once their personalities had been firmly established). The fact that audiences expected them to behave offscreen as they did before the camera counters the accusations of 'unrealistic' flatness made at the stereotyped characters they portrayed, breaking down the flat/rounded, artificial/real binarisms which have been left uninterrogated in the analysis of stereotypes. The continuity of these comic actors' public images often extended beyond *Carry On*: Sid James, for example,

played similar Joe Public types in *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Bless This House* (again called Sid in both programmes) which contributed to the popular notion of the 'real' Sid James.

Such continuity is particularly important when considering gay representations: Williams and Hawtrey were camp queens. This is one reason why I find the dismissal of their characters as 'negative images' so troubling – their portrayals of campness reflected the way gay men at that time were addressing and communicating their sexual identity. As such, they would be able to transmit queer messages, while performing within the constraints of heterosexual narratives, ironically mimicking straight expectations while pointing to an alternative reading – in other words, the tactic of camp. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued, 'The typifying gesture of camp is really something amazingly simple: the moment at which a consumer of culture makes the wild surmise, "What if whoever made this was gay too?" . . . What if the right audience for this were exactly me? . . . And what if, furthermore, others whom I don't know or recognise can see it from the same perverse angle?'¹⁵

¹⁵ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p. 156.

¹⁶ Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, pp. 11–12.

Williams's various, but consistently camp, Carry On character(s) traded on his portrayal of Sandy in *Round the Horne* (a BBC radio programme). Sandy and his 'friend' Julian spoke in *parlare*, a queer subcultural code in a straight mainstream space. While it provided straight audiences with laughable exotica and extravagance, it signified an outing to other queers listening, and a joke at the expense and exclusion of the straights. *Parlare* is an example of the subordinate consciously playing with the dominant language, twisting, perverting and inverting it (hair becomes *riah*), borrowing from East End dialect, Italian and Yiddish. Like Yiddish, 'the language of the oppressed Jewish minority', *parlare* is a "carnivalesque" language of polyphonic multi-voicedness.¹⁶ This strategy eluded the censor because the language was alien, allowing the most outrageous statements to pass: either obscurity meant they were incomprehensible nonsense to the uninitiated (though translations were sometimes given), or else double entendre guaranteed an innocent meaning in the dominant language. For example, Sandy says of Jules: 'He's a miracle of dexterity at the cottage upright' to a short burst of male laughter and groans of 'oooh . . .' from the audience. Julian also claims he changed his surname to Lestrange (ho, ho) after the character in *Sherlock Holmes*. 'Ooh, 'e loves 'olmes, 'e does', enthuses Sandy ('omes' being an elliptic form of *omees*, meaning men, and with a hint of homo too). Julian: 'We're actors by trade'. Sandy: 'Trade's been a bit rough lately. Had to take what we can get.' Julian: 'Ooh yes, rough'.

Sandy was first introduced in *Round the Horne* in 1964, and this date significantly sees the start of Williams's and Hawtrey's transition from toffs to poofs in the Carry On series. Hawtrey, as Tankard in *Carry On Cabby* (1963), makes reference to a girlfriend in his

rambling club ('We do like to go as far as we can') early on in the film, and there are no queer suggestions in the script. However, in *Carry On Spying* (1964) he plays secret agent 'double oh-ooh', with plenty more 'ooh' to come. *Spying* is also the first film which lets Williams camp it up without an upper-class accent as a safety net. At the start of the film, he is locked in a safe marked 'top secret' which is suspiciously closet-like; he can only be let out by someone who knows the combination (like the knowledgeable viewer). The narrative revolves around preventing secrets getting into the hands of the Society for the Extinction of Non-Conformist Humans (STENCH). The closet scene is repeated at the end, Williams being freed with a cry of 'Who'd have thought we'd have come out here?' before an underground explosion blows the closet apart. Without making too much of this metaphor (convenient though it is), it does betray anxiety about codes and knowledge(s), spying and privacy, and was probably alluding to fears about queer traitor scandals of the time. However, aspects of narrative and of their performances continued to 'redeem' the parts as straight: for example, Hawtrey in *Spying*, on first meeting secret agent Lila, gives the kind of lusty growl for which Sid James's libidinous characters were famous.

By 1970, homosexuality had been partly decriminalized but was still a sensitive area in the mainstream, and was more explicitly acknowledged, although still not directly addressed, in *Carry On* narratives. In *Carry On Loving* (1970), Hawtrey as Private Detective Bedsop is employed to follow Sidney Bliss, and waits for him in a singles' bar, dismissing the other men with a shake of the head. He stalks Sid through the streets to a public lavatory, where he looks under cubicle doors before getting a broom handle up the backside from the attendant and being hauled off by a policeman. In the same film, Williams plays Percy Snooper (more camp innuendo) a 'sexually-backward' marriage guidance counsellor who is horrified when ordered to marry: 'But I'm a confirmed bachelor, I don't know any women! Married . . . ? It'll disrupt my entire life!' He dismisses the prospect of heterosexual 'carnal pursuits' with 'We don't want any of that nonsense, do we?' Both characters preside over the breakdown of heterosexual couplings. In such instances, decoding is not closed to straights acquainted with offences in public toilets and the lifestyle of the gay bachelor; however, in selectively inviting queer recognition in the reader, it serves as a point of identification for queers. Double entendre, then, a camp employment of dominant signs to signify the dissident, is used as a strategy to reveal queer presence to those in the know without alerting the censor and the 'innocents' in the audience.

Percy Snooper does in fact end up married to his housekeeper Miss Dempsey (admittedly, only after she has proven her physical superiority over an enraged macho wrestler). Even though individual puns and slightly queer scenes passed the censor, comic convention, if not homophobic anxiety, required that the narrative negate open

Private Detective Bedsoe
(Charles Hawtrey) gets caught
in the act in *Carry on Loving*
(1970). Picture courtesy: BFI
Stills



readings in the closure of heterosexual marriage. Christopher Craft analyses such constraints on Wilde in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, where he argues that Wilde

could neither stage nor publish an uncloseted gay play . . . [he] transforms this delegitimation into a mode of enablement; for if the heterosexual alignment of desires and bodies were prerequisite to representation, then Wilde would foreground and expose it as such, as a convention . . . heterosexualising machinery.¹⁷

Just as Jack and Algernon point to the always/elsewhere Earnest and Bunbury (Uranist and Bum-bury), Williams's and Hawtrey's characters are nearly always destined for marriage but trade on a queerness elsewhere, off camera. The Carry On queens are effeminate and even sometimes asexual, but never expressly homosexual; however, the suggestion that the actors might be queer (in other texts, in real life) exposes the inappropriateness and conventionality of the heterosexual narrative closure of these films.

In fact, in centring on the potential of sexual pleasure beyond the confines of marriage, Carry Ons display an ambivalence towards the conventional requirement that comedy closes within the heterosexualizing structure of the formation of a family: most of the settings, as referenced in the titles, are outside the family in inhuman, anonymous institutions which do not cater for the (sexual) needs of the characters. Marion Jordan argues that, 'The source of the humour, then, is to be found in the contrast between the impossibly repeated, identical, stereotypical human beings for whom the institution's rules

¹⁷ Christopher Craft, 'Alias Bunbury: desire and determination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*', in *Representations*, no. 31 (Summer, 1990), p. 24.

¹⁸ Marion Jordan, 'Carry On . . . follow that stereotype', in Curran and Porter (eds), *British Cinema History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), p. 316.

are devised, and the diverse and unpredictable "real" people who arrive there'.¹⁸ But marriage is just another such institution and, as such, constitutes for the Carry Ons a potential comedy of the problems of heterosexuality. For example, *Carry On Loving* tells the story of the ten-year marriage of Mr and Mrs Bliss, who run the Wedded Bliss Introduction Agency, which is revealed as a sham, and in a mockery of the traditional closure of comedy, the final wedding results in married couples flinging the wedding breakfast at each other. Even when read as straight, these films act as a critique of the family, a discourse in which queers have some investment.

The very need for the narrative to rescue queers as straight, to observe narrative decorum and to ensure that the heterosexual matrix is not disturbed for those who only hear once, paradoxically problematizes the straight concept of 'normal' sexuality. Marion Jordan's examination of stereotypes in *Carry On* concentrates on the sharpness of the different types: 'the members of the different groups which are set up – male/female, married/single, working-class/middle-class – are treated as members of different species'.¹⁹ According to Jordan, the borders of difference are impassable. However, her analysis cannot be applied to male sexual identity of the characters in terms of homosexual/heterosexual – such a binarism does not exist because, as far as the narratives are concerned, everyone is always/already 'naturally' heterosexual. Instead, one could identify a binarism of hypervirility/impotency, the former containing randy young men (Jim Dale) and randy middle-aged men (Sid James, Terry Scott in *Up the Jungle* [1970]), the latter containing emasculated husbands (Terry Scott in *Camping* [1969]) and asexuals (Percy Snooper, Hawtrey as pre-Oedipal Boy Scout in shorts in *Camping*). The joke is on the frustrations of the hypervirile libido, and the inadequacies of the impotent as failed man. Both terms of the binary include masculine and effeminate men: Terry Scott as the hen-pecked husband is still 'straight-acting', and Williams in *Doctor* (1968) and Howerd in *Up the Jungle*, although effeminate, are driven by insatiable lust for female characters played by Hattie Jacques and Joan Sims respectively.

The repeated use of drag in the Carry On series, Jordan argues, safeguards the immutability of gender division because the fact that 'the stress is on grotesquerie, not attractiveness'¹⁹ proves that men cannot be women. But why then do the randy red-blooded heterosexual male characters continually lust after these 'grotesque' drag queens? In *Matron*, for example, Bernard Bresslaw says to the dragged-up Kenneth Cope, 'Cor, I could really fancy you', and Terry Scott, as the hypervirile Dr Prodd, sexually harrasses him. To be sure, such gender confusion is licensed insofar as it is derived from classical comic situations of misrecognition, disguise and transvestism, but it displays heterosexual male libido spilling over into homosexuality. Male same-sex desire is thus represented, but not

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 319.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 319.

confined within a sexual identity; instead, sexuality is portrayed (inadvertently) as something dangerously fluid and potentially destabilizing.

Given the instability of unfixed queerness, perhaps it is better for those who wish to preserve the conservative network of sexualities to restrict homosexuality to ‘the queen’. Mr Humphries in *Are You Being Served?* is effeminate but not posh: with him, the closet finally explodes as the camp stereotype is at last allowed to come out as ‘really’ homosexual. And Mr Humphries is not just homosexual, he is gay at a time when the word was still radically political: he was post-Liberation both historically and sexually. Whereas same-sex desire had previously been represented obliquely through double-entendre or mistaken gender identities, the narrative of *Are You Being Served?* frequently addresses Mr Humphries’s homosexual libido directly: for example, in the episode ‘His and Hers’, when he is seduced by a sexy male voice (only to discover it is part of a taped perfume promotion). So should we perhaps read Mr Humphries’s catchphrase of ‘I’m free!’ as a triumphant cry of liberation?

Perhaps not. Analysis of sitcom has stressed its conservative function. Rather than operating as ludic conspiracy, an open(ing) structure which ‘is aware of language and works by deconstructing it and recombining it’ (as was inadvertently happening with having camp queens play straights), sitcom is a form of comedy which ‘rests on a natural language and deals with social disruption’.²¹ The audience is ‘invited to eavesdrop’ rather than to conspire – Neale calls it ‘“naturalistic” comedy’,²² although I would rather stress it as a naturalizing structure and, as such, a closing of the natural, a delineation of ‘us’ against ‘them’.

The given ‘natural’, the ‘us’, to which sitcom points, and which it invisibly (re)constructs, is the heterosexual reproductive family as the familiar, the verisimilar (social experience of mass culture: the putative ‘real everyday world’). Endless sitcoms such as *No Place Like Home*, *Terry and June*, *Keep It In The Family*, *George and Mildred* and *Bless This House* construct the bourgeois structure of the nuclear family as central within the delineation of inside/outside (with inside winning always). This successful expulsion of the outside threat is necessitated by the structure of sitcom as series; to build up a regular audience, the narrative must start from, and return to, a recognizable and familiar situation. The family is the verisimilitude which sitcom breaks down in order to reestablish. This operates as a stabilizing and conservative structure; change is not allowed beyond the end of the programme. Repetition, refamiliarization and the family all become an easily recognizable and predictable construct, safeguarding the ‘naturalness’ of sitcom representations.

Given that the conservative ‘structuring mechanisms [of sitcom] serve as a means of reaffirming norms by placing that which is outside or potentially threatening’,²³ it could be argued that, in articulating

²¹ John Ellis, ‘Made in Ealing’, *Screen* vol. 16, no. 1 (1975), pp. 78–127.

²² Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, p. 242.

²³ Ibid., p. 236.

²⁴ John R. Leo, 'The familialism of "man" in American television melodrama', in Butters, Clum and Moo (eds), *Displacing Homophobia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), p. 32. (quoting Barthes's *S/Z*).

²⁵ Mick Eaton, 'Laughter in the dark', *Screen*, vol. 22, no. 2 (1981), p. 25.

²⁶ Susan Boyd-Bowman, 'Back to camp', in Jim Cook (ed.), *Television Sitcom* (BFI Dossier) (London: British Film Institute, 1984), p. 57.

what was previously unspeakable, sitcom can contain queerness, closing it within a stereotype, 'a reduction of classes of people and events to a pure denotation ("the one which seems both to establish and close the reading"). The stereotype would think for us', but 'invisibly, seemingly "naturally"'.²⁴ Male homosexuality is represented so that the family audience, while laughing at it, does not have to think about it. Even if initially outing the queer was a radical 'transgression of the familiar', Mr Humphries's weekly appearance within sitcom was a 'familiarization of the transgression'²⁵ – that single representation thus comes to stand for all queerness: all queers are, naturally and transhistorically, like that.

However, Lloyd and Croft comedies are atypical. They deal with class-sensitive social situations beyond the naturalizing confine of the family: the armed forces (*Dad's Army*, *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*); the holiday camp (*Hi-de-Hi*); domestic staff (*You Rang M'Lord?*). The social cohesion that keeps the workers together in *Are You Being Served?* is only their pay packet, not the family values of the domestic sitcom. The reason for their convergence is a simple matter of material necessity. There is no appeal to any spiritual or moral reason for their bonding.

Susan Boyd-Bowman has analysed Lloyd and Croft sitcoms on the basis of this difference: 'The staff or troupe is a self-contained group poised between poles of "others"'; in the case of *Are You Being Served?*, she posits the primary group as sales staff between the retail trade and the customers. 'These poles define the world of the series more precisely than the family/outsiders duality of classic sitcom.'²⁶ The zero point from and to which the narrative returns is the smooth running of Grace Brothers' department store, physically embodied in, and contained within, the set of the shop from which the series rarely strays. The disruptions come from above – the management, as represented by Young (later Old) Mr Grace (Mr Rumbold's eyes gaze heavenward when talking of managerial directives in terms of 'the powers that be') – and outside – the customers, who arrive in the lift. The biological family is pushed to that outside with occasional references to offscreen homes and unseen familial arrangements.

Lloyd and Croft comedies present a conventional structure which decentres the dominant ideology of the family. An alternative, still within the verisimilar, is used instead. The queer is positioned outside the family, but the centre of *Are You Being Served?* is beyond the family too, making this a potentially ambivalent space. The ambivalence is only closed to disavowal or ridicule if the verisimilar against which it stands assumes that the biological family is always the essential social unit, and that the camp (non-reproductive) man is (therefore) a failed man. The dominant may assume such a reading, but the 'unfinalizedness' does allow for others. Todorov defines the verisimilar as a 'scattered discourse that in part belongs to each of the individuals of a society but of which none may claim ownership'

²⁷ Todorov, quoted in Neale and Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, p. 84.

rather than a closed referent. This is useful in that it acknowledges a diversity and contestation within 'public opinion'.²⁷ There is no sense of embarrassment or shame in Mr Humphries's camp; on the contrary, he is assertive and confident. The portrayal is ambivalent, and it is left to the reader to provide the judgement. A liberal reading of camp stereotypes as unsatisfactory role models actually reinforces conservative ideology. As a child watching *Are You Being Served?*, the camp queen became part of my familiar cultural knowledge. There was nothing in the sitcom to dispute my assumption that the nice man who kept screaming 'I'm free!' was one of the good guys.

In providing a closed image of homosexuality, sitcom has at least spoken its name. The queer stereotype is acknowledged as a sociocultural force to be reckoned with. Richard Dyer has argued against the dismissal of stereotypes;²⁸ the alternative, the bourgeois, rounded individual, prevents sexual marginalization from being seen in terms of class, sex and race, in terms of any collective identity or subculture. We see this in *Are You Being Served?*. Just as John Inman's character is heir to the legacy of Williams and Hawtrey, so the other roles have been appropriated from the Carry On types identified by Jordan;²⁹ Mrs Slocombe as 'middle-aged harridan', Miss Brahms as 'saucy girlfriend', Mr Lucas as 'sexually voracious' young man 'plotting seduction', and so on. When the actors playing Mr Mash, Mr Granger, Mr Lucas and Young Mr Grace retired from their roles, the characters were replaced almost unnoticeably, an indication of their verisimilitude, their 'realness' ('we all know them'). Thus the presence of Mr Humphries as a gay man may have pointed to other gay characters of the type waiting to replace him in the event of John Inman's departure. The character himself is allowed to acknowledge some sort of gay scene, a network of other gay men (he even gets to have a drink with some transsexual friends in the sitcom's solitary venture into film). And as with Hawtrey and Williams, John Inman's character offscreen was perceived as consistent with Mr Humphries, pointing to the existence of queers in 'real life'.

This is the advantage of the stereotype: Marion Jordan writes that 'Walter Lippmann's original conception of the word was that the stressing of similarities within a group was a way of asserting the value of that group'. But, 'If the ascription of shared characteristics to any group is made from outside, however, then it is likely that the shared features will be both less positive and more crudely inescapable'.³⁰ Richard Dyer similarly argues for the access of subcultures to a means of self-representation and against misrepresentation by the dominant. But I question the extent to which these were unequivocally straight-defined portrayals. The actors I have concentrated on were all known to be gay, and Lloyd and Croft could be accused of coming to comedy with an explicit agenda of sexual politics. They may be more progressive than is generally acknowledged. The recent media furore over lesbian characters in

²⁸ Richard Dyer, 'Stereotyping' in *Gays and Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), p. 27.

²⁹ Jordan, 'Carry on... follow that stereotype', pp. 316–17.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 313.

soaps has obscured the fact that Lloyd's and Croft's *You Rang M'Lord*, first screened in 1988, was the first British series ever to have a regular lesbian character, Sissy, and furthermore, right at the heart of the respectable family. To have *any* explicitly homosexual representation at all in family entertainment was problematic in the early 1970s. When the scripts for the first series of *Are You Being Served?* were submitted for the scrutiny of the head of Light Entertainment, there was a demand that 'the poof' be removed on the grounds that the character transgressed the limits of taste and decency expected of a prime-time comedy. However, the writers insisted that he be kept in. Nearly all of the Lloyd and Croft series since have contained queers.

My analysis clearly comes from a historical and cultural perspective of queer confidence. It would have been hard for most contemporary gay viewers to read comfortably beyond the heterosexual imperative of these comedies. Given the lack of gay representation, positive, negative, ambivalent or otherwise, the queers in the *Carry On* series and *Are You Being Served?* are politically overburdened. The criticism of gay men who grew up with these camp stereotypes, that they provided only a single, undesirable model of homosexual identity, is of course a valid and indisputable one. To be sure, these representations were not confrontational or challenging. But neither were they oppressive, outright demonizations; they were sensitive negotiations. These queens had to speak from within, and under the cover of, the dominant – double entendre is the language of the closet. The queer reading of camp has always been implicit rather than explicit, subordinate to the heterosexual context which produced it, and a fleeting pleasure in the heterosexualizing drive of the narrative. For the final evolution, when the mincing queen emerges as the triumphant dominator of the language, we had to wait for Julian Clary's 1992 sitcom *Terry and Julian*. At last, double entendre is rendered hilariously redundant by the over-statement of what was once implicit, and the only reading which makes sense is the queer one.

reports and debates

The Piano debate:

Tempestuous petticoats: costume and desire in *The Piano*

STELLA BRUZZI

Clothes in costume films have been used in a multiplicity of ways, most commonly, as in many Merchant-Ivory adaptations, as a decorative patina glossing a precise recreation of a usually literary past. In a previous article I have focused on the distinction between two alternative feminist uses of costume and history: the 'liberal' and the 'sexual'. The liberal method, exemplified by films such as Margarethe von Trotta's *Rosa Luxemburg* (1985) and Gillian Armstrong's *My Brilliant Career* (1979), concentrates on finding a political and ideological affinity between present and past women, whilst the sexual model, exemplified by Jane Campion's *The Piano* (1993), uses the clothes themselves to initiate an examination of women's relationship to their sexual history.¹ In this article, I intend to explore the sensuality as well as the sexuality of clothes in *The Piano*, as both costume and the body appear linked in this film to a complex feminist displacement of the conventionalized objectification of the woman's form dominated by scopophilia and fetishism. Ada's fierce independence is expressed through her repeated refusal to conform to the designated role of the pacified and distanced image of woman contained by the voyeuristic male gaze. In her muteness, her musicality and the expression of her sexual desire through touch, Ada represents the possibility of a radical alternative feminine and feminist

1 Stella Bruzzi, 'Jane Campion: costume drama and reclaiming women's past', in Pam Cook and Philip Dodd (eds), *Women and Film: a Sight and Sound Reader* (London: Scarlett Press, 1993), pp. 232–42.

Ada and Flora (Holly Hunter and Anna Paquin) in *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993). Picture courtesy: BFI Stills



2 Renee Baert 'Skirting the issue', *Screen*, vol. 35, no. 4 (1994), p. 359

3 Ibid., p. 359. It is interesting to note, however, that such categorical distinctions between how women and men relate to clothing are not always valid. In films such as *American Gigolo*, or gangster films such as *Le Samourai*, *Goodfellas* or *Reservoir Dogs*, law, fantasy, representation and will or desire are seen to intersect on the male body and its relation to clothes.

mode of discourse, and clothes become this 'language's' most eloquent tools.

Clothing, Renee Baert has noted, 'is a compound medium and critical axis of the social (law), the sexual (fantasy), the figural (representation) and the individual (will and desire)'.² As Baert and historians have noted, such complexity is primarily attributed to women's rather than men's clothes because historically women's social presence has been more closely aligned to, and circumscribed by, their physical appearance. The logical extension of such an observation is, therefore, that gender conventions can be subverted 'through clothing itself'.³ A similar subversion tactic is evident in *The Piano*, as Ada's oppressive Victorian clothes are made to function

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: an Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), pp. 4–5.

⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 33–5.

⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

both for and against her, and are both internal and external signifiers of her desire and her social position. But the film further suggests the more radical potential of clothes as part of an oppositional discourse not reliant for signification (even through a positive appropriation of difference) on any such established patriarchal models. Michel Foucault's analysis of the methods by which 'modern puritanism imposed its triple edict of taboo, nonexistence and silence'⁴ on sex and the expression of sexuality (from the eighteenth century onwards), offers a revolutionary thesis for understanding the outcome of such administered censorship. Far from imposing censorship, what was installed was 'an apparatus for producing an ever greater quantity of discourse about sex',⁵ so that sex was 'driven out of hiding and constrained to lead a discursive existence' which was simultaneously spoken of and exploited as 'the secret'.⁶ The dialectic between intention (to repress sex) and the 'putting into discourse of sex'⁷ is given narrative representation in *The Piano* through the conflict between Stewart, the archetypal nineteenth-century colonial husband bound by a burdensome sense of his position within patriarchal history, and Ada, the transgressive wife who creates alternative discursive strategies to counter such intended subjugation. The multiple ways in which such a delineation is manifested is through a series of binary oppositions rooted in a presentation of the primary difference between male and female. The secondary oppositions (masculine/feminine, distance/nearness, looking/touching) are first posited and then subverted, as much by the transgressive male figure, Baines, as by Ada. The complex reworkings of gender stereotypes in *The Piano* are located within costume, the film ultimately advancing a feminist discourse of clothes that neither absents the body nor simply reinforces traditional interpretations of the feminine.

There is an imposed distance between clothes, intended to contain or camouflage, and sexuality; and it is that very conflict or opposition that makes for the 'clothes-language' utilized by Peter Weir in *Picnic At Hanging Rock* (1975) and *Witness* (1985), Jane Campion in *The Piano* or Martin Scorsese in *The Age of Innocence* (1994). A film such as *Picnic At Hanging Rock* creates an adolescent, sexual, mysterious world based on comparable oppositions to *The Piano*, but the differences (like the mystery at the core of the narrative) remain intact. The underpinning reason for this is that the representation of sexuality in *Picnic* is exclusively linked to the act of looking – scopophilia, voyeurism and the fetishization of clothes – and that look, in a highly conventional way, is masculine: directed from men to women (both from character to character and from spectator to image). This is not unsatisfying, but titillating: playing around with the allure of the prohibited. As Freud writes in the section 'Touching and looking' in *The Sexual Aberrations*: 'The progressive concealment of the body which goes along with civilisation keeps sexual curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden

⁸ Sigmund Freud 'The sexual aberrations' in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), p. 69.

parts'.⁸ In costume films interested in sexuality (above nostalgia and history telling) the contrast between the obtainable concealed body and the means of enforcing that concealment (namely the clothes) is seen to heighten expectations and arousal. There is, for example, the coincidentally embarrassing and touching portrayal in *The Age of Innocence* of Newland Archer's desire for the Countess Olenska through the action of him stooping to kiss the delicate embroidered shoe that is peeking out from beneath her dress; this scene, though emotionally charged, is reminiscent of Luis Buñuel's comic treatment of shoe fetishism in *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1946). Paul Cox's *The Golden Braid* (1990) dwells on a man's obsessive attachment to a lock of woman's hair, perhaps a more satisfying substitute for the unobtainable object than the scrap of dirty lace Michael clings on to in *Picnic At Hanging Rock*. Important to all these instances of the fetishization of the woman and of the man's desire is the notion of difference, contrast and, most significantly, distance.

Christian Metz suggests distance rather than proximity is essential to the voyeuristic impulse, that 'all desire depends on the infinite pursuit of its absent object'.⁹ Although perhaps too much has been said about the sequence in *The Age of Innocence* where Newland symbolically unbuttons Olenska's glove and kisses her exposed wrist, such a scene highlights the erotic effect of symbolically suggesting a passion that will never be consummated – where the distance remains intact. Is distance therefore more erotic than closeness? In the poems of the seventeenth-century priest Robert Herrick, the man's desire for the impossible female body is transmuted into a playful, aching longing for his Julia's clothes, reminiscent in its passion and furtive guilt of Foucault's account of the 'meticulous' confessional that shifted the 'most important moment of transgression from the act itself to the stirrings – so difficult to perceive and formulate – of desire'.¹⁰ Herrick's verse resonates with a desire for an image of woman so objectified that the mythic Julia's identity is lost beneath 'that liquefaction of her clothes'.¹¹ Her 'erring lace', 'tempestuous petticoat' and 'careless shoestring'¹² are such sufficient substitutes that the poet finds himself doting 'less on nature, than on art':¹³ the artifice, the fabrication is more alluring than the possible attainment of intimacy itself.

As Freud articulates, fetishism and scopophilia become perversions if, among other things, 'instead of being preparatory to the normal sexual aim, [they] supplant it'.¹⁴ Without entering into the obvious and necessary battle with Freud over what is 'normal' (although all the films I have cited are emphatically heterosexual) this misdirection of desire is precisely what occurs in both Herrick's love poetry and Weir's excessive, hysterical sexual fantasy *Picnic At Hanging Rock*. What Freud terms 'unsuitable substitutes for the sexual object'¹⁵ remain at the core of how fetishistic films such as *Picnic At Hanging Rock*, *Witness*, *The Age of Innocence* or *Diary of a Chambermaid*

⁹ Christian Metz, 'The imaginary signifier', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1975), p. 60.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, pp. 19–20.

¹¹ Robert Herrick, 'Upon Julia's Clothes', in Alastair Fowler (ed.), *The New Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 276.

¹² Herrick, 'Delight in disorder', in *ibid.*, pp. 257–8.

¹³ Herrick, 'Art above nature: to Julia' in *ibid.*, pp. 273–4.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'The sexual aberrations', p. 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism', in *On Sexuality*, pp. 354–5.

¹⁷ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', in Bill Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 309.

¹⁸ Mary Ann Doane, 'Women's stake: filming the female body', in *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 165.

¹⁹ Richard Dyer, 'Don't look now – the male pin-up', *Screen*, vol. 23, nos 3–4 (1982) pp. 61–73 for a discussion of some of the strategies posing men adopt to counter the subjugation of being framed.

²⁰ Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', p. 311. I have used – but inverted – Mulvey's analysis of direct fetishization, as she is here talking exclusively of the spectator as male.

²¹ Baines has been clearly identified as heterosexual, a sexuality not complicated by the implied homosexuality of many other (often narcissistic) male characters like the similarly 'looked at' Julian in *American Gigolo*. See, for instance, Patricia Mellencamp 'The unfashionable male subject', in Jeanne Ruppert (ed.), *Gender: Literary and Cinematic Representation* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), pp. 17–24.

represent clothes and female sexuality: there is an increasing fixation on the clothes, shoes and hats the women are wearing (the fetishes that remind the male of the 'last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic')¹⁶ and thus a transferral of desire from them to their conventionally feminine garments. The act of looking is closely affiliated with men and the expression of masculine sexuality, and in these costume films a classic heterosexual dynamic has been constructed whereby the women are defined and confined by their 'to-be-looked-at-ness'¹⁷ whilst the men are positioned as the controlling subjects of the gaze. If 'the simple gesture of directing a camera toward a woman has become equivalent to a terrorist act',¹⁸ then men are unlikely to desire such disempowering objectification by turning the camera on themselves.¹⁹

The Piano, enforcing a simple inversion of the normative process, addresses the question of what happens when the agent of the gaze is female and its object is the male body. It is necessary, however, to contrast this reversal with the representation of Stewart as the conventional scopophilic male. Stewart is isolated in a feminist world by his dependency on voyeurism, being consistently identified with the detached act of looking: squinting through a camera lens, spying on Ada and Baines through cracks in the timber and floorboards. Stewart (whose costume was made intentionally too small for Sam Neill to give him the air of the repressed, uncomfortable Victorian gentleman) is emasculated rather than empowered by his possession of (only) the look. There are two scenes in *The Piano* which most notably demonstrate female desire of the male body and the subsequent feminization of that body as the conventional scopophilic roles are reversed: one which positions Ada as the subject of the gaze, and one in which the intermediary figure is dispensed with and Baines is placed 'in direct erotic rapport with the (implicitly female) spectator'.²⁰ The latter scene, showing the naked Baines dusting and caressing the piano (which is, by its direct association with her, a fetish substitute for Ada), directly confronts the spectator with an unconventional representation of masculinity: the heterosexual male object of the female gaze.²¹ The former scene shows Ada stroking Stewart's body as he is half asleep, emphasizing his passivity and her manipulation of him. What characterizes both sequences is the use of a luscious golden light and a fluid camera that (ironically in Stewart's case) intensifies the attraction of the male skin. The similarities between these two scenes is indicative of the relative positioning of Stewart and Baines throughout the film as oppositional images of masculinity. Baines, with his Maori markings, hybrid clothes and unkempt hair repeatedly functions to confront Stewart with his own lack. When spying on Baines with Ada, Stewart perceives in Baines his unobtainable and idealized double, whom he then (by trying to rape Ada or by wanting to hear her play the piano) tries to emulate. The active look clearly appropriated by Ada also serves to pacify Stewart, most effectively

during his second attempt to rape her as she lies semi-conscious after he has cut off her finger. Her stare of disbelief as she awakes to see Stewart over her unbuttoning his trousers (having been aroused by the flesh exposed through her pantaloons) both interrupts the rape and functions as the mirror to reflect his shame.

In a feminized world in which the distant voyeuristic male look is passive, impotent and unable to intrude, let alone possess, the notion of women connoting ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ needs to be modified. In *The Piano*, the spectator has become disengaged from the fetishistic male gaze, as our look is most emphatically not aligned with Stewart’s. There are two ways in which the spectator’s alignment with the feminist perspective is manifested: through an ambivalent treatment of Ada’s clothes in relation to her body and sex, and through the prioritization of other senses (notably touch) to convey the sexuality of the Ada/Baines partnership. In terms of how Ada works in collusion with the signification of her Victorian clothes, she demonstrates the positive or active use of womanliness as masquerade proffered by Mary Ann Doane. Whereas Joan Riviere’s analysis of the masquerade finds it to be synonymous with womanliness, in that the excessive presentation of femininity is operating to attract the male gaze and confirm the woman’s position as his other,²² Doane suggests the active, affirmative potential of masquerade which offers women ‘sexual mobility’²³ by flaunting femininity and thus keeping it at a distance. Although Doane subsequently modifies her views on the feminist potential of masquerade,²⁴ the performative quality of many of Ada’s actions related to clothes implies that an affirmative masquerade is perhaps still possible, that it can indeed ‘provide a feminine counter to the concept of fetishism’.²⁵ There is, for example, the direct play with the archetypal feminine role as Ada cursorily flings her bridal dress over her day clothes to pose for herself (in front of the mirror), Stewart (looking through the camera) and finally for their commemorative wedding photograph.

This performative potential of costume is most intricately demonstrated in the equivocal meanings attributed to Ada’s cumbersome Victorian clothes, the innovation being the discovery of a language capable of articulating a radical opposition to the restrictions often forcibly imposed on the Victorian wife through the very means by which those restrictions are conventionally manifested. It is not simplistically indicated that hooped skirts have suddenly acquired liberating potential: they still hamper progress through interminable mud and prevent Aunt Morag from easily relieving herself when ‘caught short’. Rather, the duality of the costumes in *The Piano* is that they function as alternately affirming and undermining forces. At times they conform to expectations of the restrictive mid-Victorian age, giving Ada and Flora the appearance of dwarfish dolls weighed down by the exaggerated hugeness of their multiple skirts, only unshackled when able to take such garments off (as when Flora

²² Joan Riviere, ‘Womanliness as masquerade’, in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (eds), *Formations of Fantasy* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 35–44.

²³ Mary Ann Doane, ‘Film and the masquerade: theorising the female spectator’, in *Femmes Fatales*, p. 25.

²⁴ Mary Ann Doane, ‘Masquerade reconsidered: further thoughts on the female spectator’, in *Femmes Fatales*, pp. 33–43.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 39.

cartwheels on the beach). Likewise, Stewart is forced into the strict confines of his traditional role via his tight and awkward clothes, in direct contrast to Baines who mixes Maori with European. In Stewart's case, therefore, the clothes maketh the man. Conversely, Ada defies Simone de Beauvoir's pessimism and is not defined or identified by what she wears. The most powerful example of Ada proving that her cumbersome clothes can be protective and fulfil a positive function is during Stewart's first thwarted attempt at raping her in the tangled (sexual) wood. As Ada clings onto the tendril branches of the trees, Stewart tries violently to find a way to the body beneath the layers of skirt, underskirts and hoops, to force the closeness he has seen her enjoy with Baines. The hooped skirt, which (along with Flora calling her) gets in the way here, is a persistent visual indicator throughout the film of Ada's wilful control over her clothes and her life. The hoops, at the outset, offer a protective tent; later, exposed during the sex scene between Ada and Baines, the crouching Baines (unlike Stewart) is permitted under the hoops; and finally as Ada is pulled under the water with the piano her silhouetted hoops almost get in the way of her disentangling her foot.

Ada similarly functions ambivalently in relation to her colour, the whiteness of which is exacerbated by the severity of her dark clothes and formal hair. As Richard Dyer observes, 'trying to think about the representation of whiteness . . . is difficult, partly because white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular'.²⁶ In *The Piano* whiteness is a similarly inconsistent signifier which in turn represents aggression (the colonial invasion), the potential sensuality of that colonial male body (the closeups of Baines and Stewart) and unaestheticized pallor (Ada). In the first instance, whiteness (like the colonial master Stewart) is shown to be ineffective rather than omnipotent: the Maoris scorn Stewart for offering them buttons rather than money, and they refuse to exchange their land for his blankets and guns. The most unexpected uses of whiteness, though, are those linked with sex and sexuality, both of which serve to accentuate or make strange its presumed signification. The incongruous eroticization of Stewart not only conflicts with his persona as European invader, but draws attention to, rather than takes for granted, his white heterosexual masculinity: traditionally something which is summarily ignored as the given or universal category against which others define themselves. Ada's defiance extends to her skin, the whiteness of which is never fetishized or aestheticized, so jarring with, rather than complementing, her attractiveness and sensuality; in the scene in which Stewart pursues her into the woods, the distorting lens and flat blue light de-eroticize her face completely.

If the masquerade is to be a feminist strategy, then its use should in some way facilitate the implicit presentation of woman as not merely spectacle: the locus of the 'collective fantasy of phallocentrism'.²⁷ It

²⁶ Richard Dyer, 'White', in *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 141.

²⁷ Claire Johnston, 'Women's cinema as counter-cinema', in Nichols (ed.), *Movies and Methods II*, p. 211.

²⁸ Luce Irigaray, 'This sex which is not one', in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 25.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 26.

³⁰ Doane, 'Film and the masquerade', p. 21.

³¹ Irigaray, 'This sex which is not one', p. 31.

³² It is also significant that Baines gradually takes his clothes off as well.

follows that the reappropriation of male-designated roles for women is fundamental to the development of Ada's relationship with Baines. After defining the woman's traditional sexual role as 'a more or less obliging prop for the enactment of men's fantasies', Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One* suggests that 'woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's'.²⁸ A woman's (body) 'language' is described as being related to touch, as 'woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking, and her entry into the dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity'.²⁹ Similarly *The Piano* suggests that Ada's progression from passivity to activity is related to her defiance of objectification and a sexual dialogue reliant on the hierarchical exchange of looks. In order to win back her piano, Ada agrees to a bizarre striptease relationship with Baines, bartering black keys for items of clothing. This strip subverts the norm through the insertion of touching rather than looking as the primary mode of communication: Baines stroking Ada's arm as she plays the piano, the two of them lying together naked and finally the two of them having sex. Traditionally, feminist critics have only been able to perceive a strip as part of a dominant system that aligns 'sexual difference with a subject/object autonomy', that 'an essential attribute of that dominant system is the matching of male subjectivity with the agency of the look'.³⁰ When, however, the exchanges are defined through touch the relationship defies (or reverses) this binary system, and the dominant discursive strategy is aligned to a female subject. Irigaray talks of a 'nearness so pronounced that it makes all discrimination of identity, and thus all forms of property, impossible';³¹ likewise, Ada's 'nearness' decommercializes the strip by changing its (scopophilic) rules, and in so doing defetishizes her own clothes and body.³² Whereas clothes fetishism is dependent on an implied separation of garments from body (and thus of imagination from fulfilment), in Ada's piano-playing scenes with Baines the emphasis is on proximity, as the (touching of) clothes and body are part of the same ritualistic process, leading not to distanciation but sex. To return briefly to Freud's distinction between touching and looking, looking can more easily become a 'perversion' because of the distance it necessarily enforces between subject and object (in *Picnic At Hanging Rock*, for instance, none of the characters who are infatuated with one other touch). Touch, however, in requiring closeness, is an inevitable constituent of 'normal' sex. As clothes in *The Piano* become components of a discourse based on touch, so the difference subsides between the masculine perception of women as (merely) body, whose identity is forged by symbolic interaction, and the feminist redefinition of the woman as (whole) body whose feminine expressiveness is based on that body's reclamation.

The prioritization of touch over looking is further conveyed, perhaps paradoxically, through the use of the camera, conventionally

³³ Alison Butler, quoted in Elizabeth Cowie's untitled entry in *Camera Obscura*, nos. 20–21 (1989), p. 128.

the tool of mainstream cinema's 'inevitably voyeuristic, exploitative and male' gaze.³³ The camera often mimics either the movements or the desire of Ada and Baines, notably during the scene in which Baines is crouched under the piano having got underneath Ada's skirt and is feeling the bit of exposed skin through her worsted stockings with his rough finger. The use of extreme closeup here suggests more than the distance between desire and 'absent object' of the fetishistic films mentioned earlier. The camera's nearness and the contrasting textures convey the pleasure of touch. This alternative sexual discourse which links touch to both clothes and body, and thus suggests a further proximity (in opposition to masculine distance) between clothes and body, is the film's means of articulating Ada's sexual awakening. As her relationship with Baines progresses, so Ada's expressiveness through the sense of touch increases, from running the back of her hand along the piano keys to caressing Stewart's body. Whilst Stewart, for a moment, mistakenly thinks Ada has discovered a desire for him (when he attempts to touch her Ada recoils), this sequence rather suggests that Ada has discovered a more abstract desire for closeness, confirmed again by the ostensibly anachronistic use of closeup and exaggeratedly warm lighting.³⁴

³⁴ Usually such identification with Stewart is absent, and scenes that revolve around him are often coloured a much colder blue.

The development of a sexual discourse which foregrounds touch as its dominant sense, therefore, subverts and supplants its masculine voyeuristic alternative. Stewart's adherence to that male dependency on the look is what, in this instance, renders him passive. As the camera often subjectifies Ada's gaze, so it usually objectifies Stewart's by underlining and looking at his (often physical) separation from the emotional centre of the film. *The Piano* thus conforms to the strictures of mainstream cinema, and yet subverts the primary strategy of that form by distancing the active gaze from the male subject, creating instead an interrelationship between an active female subject and the feminine sense of touch. Of significance to a form of feminine communication foregrounding touch and the body is Ada's muteness, a further (feminist) rebellion, this time seeking to marginalize spoken language. Ada's active disengagement from (man-made) language is necessarily affiliated to her representation as a non-conformist force. Ada, aged six, stopped speaking, not as the result of a conventional female trauma as in *Possessed* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1947) or *The Spiral Staircase* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), but because (more like Christine in *A Question of Silence* [Marleen Gorris, 1981]) she simply decided to. Her muteness becomes a symbol for her transgression, control and defiance of patriarchal law. What characterizes most earlier representations of female muteness is the woman's implied desire to be 'saved' from her vulnerable but threatening position beyond the dominant (language-based) discourse and to be restored to a traditional role within the realm of the symbolic by the assistance of a good man. What, conversely, characterizes all of Ada's sensory transgressions is the fierceness with which she adheres to her non-conformity, the

physicality with which she communicates and defines her personal space. Although functioning in relation to patriarchal laws Ada is not subsumed by them and, despite all the potential for restriction, oppression and unhappiness, she is the controlling force of both the narrative and how the film is to be perceived. The various factors that have appeared through the film to represent her fierce resolve (her muteness, her clothes, her piano) converge in the final sequences as Ada decides first to die along with her piano and then to live. As the voiceover suggests, as an end this would have been perfect: quintessentially dramatic, feminine and silent; Ada caught in the rope half-exposed, half-engulfed in her clothes, eroticized in death. In wanting to live, however, Ada consigns this image to fantasy, lulling herself to sleep with it, keeping the 'silence' to herself. Ada's relationship to classic syntax (whether verbal, scopophilic or narrative) has always been problematic, and to die in the mode of a tragic heroine would have been to succumb to another masculine tradition. Instead, Ada defines and communicates herself and her desires differently, unbalancing those traditions and instating female subjectivity.

The return of the repressed? Whiteness, femininity and colonialism in *The Piano*

LYNDA DYSON

In this article I will argue that *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993) re-presents the story of colonization in New Zealand as a narrative of reconciliation. In doing so, the film addresses the concerns of the dominant white majority there, providing a textual palliative for postcolonial anxieties generated by the contemporary struggles over the nation's past. During the last decade, white New Zealanders have been forced to reassess their colonial history as a result of the demands for justice by the 'indigenous' Maori people which, together with Britain's continuing shift of focus away from the former loyalties of Empire, have brought about a 'crisis' of national identity. These are troubling times for white New Zealanders and it is within this context that I wish to consider *The Piano*.

My analysis of the film highlights the way in which it draws on and reproduces a repertoire of colonial tropes. The critical acclaim surrounding the film constructed *The Piano* as a feminist exploration of nineteenth-century sexuality and tended to ignore the way in which 'race' is embedded in the text. Whilst the construction of gender and sexuality is obviously a central theme in *The Piano*, the film's representation of a colonial landscape must necessarily be considered within the context of the contemporary debates over national belonging in New Zealand – debates which have resonances within the wider field of postcolonial theory.

In the film, Ada McGrath (Holly Hunter) travels to New Zealand for an arranged marriage with the white settler landowner Stewart

(Sam Neill). Ada arrives on the coast of New Zealand accompanied by her daughter Flora (Anna Paquin), a grand piano and a clutch of possessions. She is an elective mute and communicates with the world using sign language which her daughter verbalizes. The colonial landscape provides the setting for Ada's sexual awakening. Stewart agrees to trade Ada's piano for a block of land belonging to Baines (Harvey Keitel), a white man who speaks Maori and has *moko* (tattoos) on his face. Ada is forced to give Baines piano lessons, but when it transpires that the transaction is an attempt by Baines to get closer to Ada they strike a deal in which the keys of the piano are exchanged for caresses. An intimate relationship develops which Stewart eventually discovers. In an act of brutal retribution he severs Ada's finger with an axe. Soon after, he agrees to let her leave to start a new life with Baines and Flora.

The fantasy of colonial reconciliation is played out through the developing sexual relationship between Ada and Baines. At the end of the film, Ada chooses 'life' after jumping overboard with her piano. She leaves the instrument (the symbol of European bourgeois culture) at the bottom of the ocean, thus severing her connection with the imperial centre and begins her life anew with her man who has already 'gone native'. They become born-again New Zealanders living in a gleaming white house where the mute Ada rediscovers her voice.

This romantic melodrama is set in a landscape where 'natives' provide the backdrop for the emotional drama of the principal white characters. The Maori are located on the margins of the film as the repositories of an authentic, unchanging and simple way of life: they play 'nature' to the white characters' 'culture'. If we read *The Piano* as Ada McGrath's rite of passage from the twilight gloom of Scotland to the bright, white place in Nelson, New Zealand, then the white settler fantasy of creating a 'New Jerusalem' is represented through the negotiation of the nature/culture divide. This opposition draws on the discourses of primitivism which have historically constructed the colonial Other as 'noble savage' inverting (rather than subverting) the hierarchies which have legitimized the colonial project in white settler colonies.¹ 'Indigenous' people and their cultures have been privileged as the keepers of spiritual and authentic values. Their perceived mystical attachments to the land and to nature are idealized, symbolizing all that has been lost through modernity.² Primitivism provides the means to deal with the contradictions of white settler colonialism; while the white colonizers saw themselves bringing progress and civilization to these 'pre-modern' cultures, their project was also energized by the utopian fantasy of building a society free of the political and economic divisions and inequalities of Europe.

In New Zealand, questions of belonging and indigeneity are central to the contemporary crisis of identity. White New Zealanders, who can no longer comfortably call themselves 'European', are attempting to forge a *pakeha* identity. '*Pakeha*' is a Maori word, highly contested in

1 For a discussion of the way in which these 'primitivist inversions' are serving New Age identities in white settler colonies see Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994).

2 See Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intelects, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

3 This term was originally a Maori word which designated 'outsider' status to white settlers; it has recently been taken up by white New Zealanders as a way of claiming their own indigeneity and thus bestowing insider status upon themselves.

4 Jennifer Lawn, 'Pakeha Bonding', in *Meanjin*, vol. 53, no. 2 (1994), p. 301.

5 Claire Pajaczewska and Lola Young discuss whiteness as 'absent centre' in the essay 'Racism, representation, psychoanalysis', in J. Donald and A. Rattansi (eds), 'Race', *Culture and Difference* (London: Sage, 1992), p. 202.

6 After Maori chiefs had signed the Treaty of Waitangi on 6 February 1840, the British governor, William Hobson, shook hands with each one and said 'He iwi tahi tatou' – 'We are now one people'. This affirmation of national unity is celebrated annually by a ceremony at Waitangi which has in recent years been disrupted by land rights protesters. The ceremony received coverage in the British media on 6 February 1990 when the Queen was hit by a shirt thrown by a protester.

translation, referring to those with European ancestry or, more generally, 'outsiders'. Increasingly, it is a term being used to stake out a white ethnic identity which can make claims to 'indigeneity' through the appropriation of traditional motifs and the claiming of spiritual attachments to the land.³ Jennifer Lawn has argued that postcolonial self-fashioning using the ethnic category *pakeha* also attempts to avoid the connotations of supremacy that the word 'white' has acquired.⁴ Through the deployment of primitivist inversions 'Maoriness' becomes available to fill the perceived 'absent centre' of white identity which hovers in an uncomfortable space between colonizer and colonized: no longer European, but with no real claim on indigeneity either.⁵ In *The Piano*, Ada McGrath and George Baines negotiate in different ways the nature/culture split in order to assume an indigenized *pakeha* identity. With her piano at the bottom of the sea and her severed finger sheathed in metal – a symbol perhaps of colonial lack – the film ends with Ada speaking of 'the silence where no sound hath been'. She has sacrificed her silence in order to take up her place in the new land. This ending suggests an attempt to articulate a perceived cultural emptiness which still continues to haunt white New Zealanders.

In the following, I will firstly consider the contemporary 'crisis' of white identity in New Zealand within the context of political and cultural shifts which have come about through a reassessment of the nation's colonial past. I will then explore the way in which 'whiteness' is represented in *The Piano* through a matrix of 'race', gender and class differences.

The trivializing of the land purchases in *The Piano*, with the settlers exchanging buttons and blankets for Maori land, reminded me of school history lessons in New Zealand during the 1960s, when we were still being taught the 'naturalized' version of the nation's colonial history, in which Maori resistances were written out. In fact, 'land' has been the central site of contestation since the earliest days of settlement. The colonization of New Zealand involved the installation of a settler majority (through a 'whites only' policy) on territory formerly inhabited by Maori tribal groups. Prospective settler groups – mostly English and Scottish – purchased land from the New Zealand Company having been sold the dream of a 'New Jerusalem' which was to be built on territory 'acquired' from the indigenous people. In 1840 this 'land-grab' was legitimized by a Treaty signed by the British Crown and five hundred Maori tribal leaders. In the dominant narrative of New Zealand history, the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi symbolized the formation of the nation and then became the pivot for the elaboration of a hegemonic national identity based on the notion 'We are one people'; this construction has attempted to erase divisions of both 'race' and class in New Zealand.⁶ The terms of the Treaty were never honoured by the colonizers and, for more than thirty years following the signing, land wars raged between the Maori and the British Crown. One of the main causes of the wars was

attempts by the colonizers to enforce laws about the compulsory acquisition of what was deemed to be 'waste land', that is, land which the colonizers, deploying their ideologies of 'civilization', considered not to be cultivated or used in appropriate ways.

During the past decade, Maori tribal groups have used the Treaty of Waitangi successfully to contest the legality of the early appropriations in a specially convened Land Court. Controversially, large tracts of land and coastal fishing rights have been returned to tribal groupings. These renegotiations around the Treaty have resulted in profound cultural shifts in New Zealand. The 'Maori Renaissance' has involved a rewriting of the nation's colonial history with the Treaty as the constitutional document around which a 'bicultural' approach is now being constructed. Together with Britain's entry into the European Community (which ended the special economic relationship guaranteeing a market for New Zealand's primary produce), these political, cultural and economic shifts have shattered the national 'imaginings' of white New Zealanders whose power and privilege has been challenged from within and without the nation. Maori culture now possesses an unprecedented degree of prestige although it is debatable to what extent their political and economic power has been enhanced by 'biculturalism'. But despite the historical agency of the Maori people, and despite the fact that this debate has preoccupied the nation for a number of years, they are located on the margins and in the shadows of culture in general, and this film in particular.

In her discussion of the double articulation of the 'dark continent' as a trope which refers both to the unknowability of the colonial landscape and the 'enigma' of feminine sexuality, Mary Anne Doane explores the way in which representations of white women play a pivotal role in the articulation of 'race', class and sexuality. She argues that

The nature of white woman's racial identity as it is socially constructed is simultaneously material, economic and . . . subject to intense work at the level of representation, mobilising all the psychic reverberations attached to (white) female sexuality in order to safeguard a racial hierarchy.⁷

This analysis is particularly useful in thinking about the way in which racial, sexual and class differences are inscribed on the female body in *The Piano*. Ada, as a symbol of white bourgeois femininity, has access to a spiritual world denied the other female characters in the film. Her emotions are expressed through a powerful fusion between the musical score and the movement of the camera. A recurrent motif in the film is the closeup of Ada's shimmering face, skin bleached out, eyes closed in rapture as she plays her piano. As she plays, the camera circles her, caressing the bared shoulders and delicate stem of neck;

⁷ Mary Anne Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 245.

her vulnerable spine is exposed and elided with the whiteness of her bodice. While the eroticized image of Ada appears translucent, fragile and free from blemish, the Maori women are physically desexualized through their representation as lank-haired, toothless and devoid of the conventional markers of femininity.

In this film, hair is an important signifier of the nature/culture opposition. Hair which has been worked on, aestheticized and feminized signifies culture; it is also used to symbolize Ada's sexual awakening and liberation. The camera continually fetishizes her elaborate coils – at one point the camera literally draws us into the coil at the back of Ada's head, as if giving us access to her emotional world. She finally 'lets her hair down' after her first sexual liaison with Baines. We see her and Flora, with their gleaming hair swirling around them as they tumble on the bed, bathed in a golden glow.

Ada's cultural and racial 'purity' – exemplified by her shimmering whiteness and her sublime relationship to her music – is reinforced by the class differences represented within the film. The two plump, white female servants are accorded the status of characters but, like the Maori women, they are desexualized. Morag – with her prominent facial mole and carefully positioned kiss curl – and Nessie, with her high-pitched mimicry, provide comic relief from the emotional preoccupations of Ada and her men. These women represent the lower orders and, as such, exhibit a lack of 'refinement'. In one scene Morag urinates amongst the trees, her bodily functions serving to reinforce the high/low oppositions which mark out Ada's bourgeois femininity.

Throughout the film the primitivist discourses which construct this opposition are expressed through the juxtaposition of the repression of the white characters against the 'authenticity' of the Maori. With their bold, sexualized chat, the Maori provide the textual echo for all that has been lost through 'civilization'. Baines bridges this nature/culture divide. His facial tattoos and his ability to speak Maori signify that he has 'gone native', while his 'self-fashioning' and attachments to the land construct him as a *pakeha*: a 'real New Zealander'. While never relinquishing his whiteness, he is able to arouse Ada's passions because he is closer to nature than Stewart. He too is a member of the lower orders – in an early scene Ada describes him as an 'oaf' because he is illiterate; she insists that he wash his hands before he touches the piano. However, his baseness is constructed through the eroticization of his body. In one scene we see him washing himself in the river while a group of Maori women discuss his sexual needs – and, as if to reinforce Baines's desirability, a 'camp' Maori man dressed as a woman watches from a nearby tree. Later Baines strips naked and uses his shirt to stroke clean Ada's piano. His affinity with the land and his easy relationship with the Maori stand in contrast to Stewart. While Baines's hut is surrounded by trees, Stewart's is set in a muddy clearing amongst burnt stumps. He complains to Baines: 'What do they [the Maoris] want the land for? They don't cultivate it,

The facial tattoos and ability to speak Maori construct Baines (Harvey Keitel) as a *pakeha*. *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993).



burn it back. How do they even know it's theirs?' Through this primitivist inversion, Stewart is increasingly shown to represent the 'bad' colonial Other and stands for all that is negative in the white colonizer. He is greedy for land, sexually repressed – the Maori continually refer to him as 'old Dry Balls' – and violent. His relationship to the land is one of brutality and exploitation and this is mirrored in his treatment of Ada. On discovering her relationship with Baines, Stewart severs her finger with an axe and later he attempts to rape her.

While Stewart exploits the bush, Ada and Flora work on and aestheticize the liminal space of the beach. Early on in the film, Ada's hoops are used as a shelter which is surrounded by a wall of gleaming shells, and in another scene they construct an enormous sea-horse from shells while the camera swirls overhead, erasing all traces of labour. The use of aerial shots in this scene is reminiscent of the dominant genre of landscape photography in New Zealand which constructs the landscape as a prelapsarian paradise. It is as if their femininity – played out through their emotions and aestheticized in the realm of culture – separates them from the degradations of colonialism; in this sense, they are closer to nature.

Whiteness as purity is a recurring motif in the film. While the Maori are at one with the bush (to the extent that they are even visible) the film continually privileges whiteness through the play of light against dark, emphasizing the binary oppositions at work in the text. This whiteness is enhanced by the use of filters, which means that while the darker skin tones of the Maori are barely discernible in the brooding shadows of the bush, the faces of Ada and Flora, framed by their bonnets, take on a luminous quality. The film's photographic

⁸ Jane Campion, *The Piano* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p. 141.

⁹ Richard Dyer, 'White', *Screen*, vol. 29, no. 4 (1988), p. 63.

director Stuart Dryburgh has described the use of 'naturalistic' lighting as an attempt to capture the 'authenticity' of the landscape:

We've tended to use strong colour accents in different parts of the film. We tried not to light the bush ourselves but to use natural light wherever possible. So we played it murky green and let the skin tones sit down amongst it. We tried to represent it honestly and let it be a dark place.⁸

Dryburgh's technicist discourse naturalizes the use of photographic technologies and codes which mediate visibility, desire and endow 'whiteness' with what Richard Dyer suggests is 'a glow and radiance that has correspondences with the transcendent rhetoric of popular Christianity'.⁹ This 'glow' of whiteness and its association with light, purity and cleanliness recurs throughout the film, for example in an early scene when the Maoris approach Ada and Flora on the beach exclaiming, 'They look like angels'. Later on in the film Flora, caught rubbing herself in a sexually suggestive way against the trunks of trees with a group of Maori children, is forced by the repressed Stewart to apply gleaming white suds to the trunks in the sombre twilight in an act of ritualized cleansing.

The primitivist discourses which construct the Maori as outside 'culture' are exemplified by the way in which the Maori are seemingly unable to distinguish between representations and the 'real'. When the Bluebeard shadow play is performed a group of Maori leap onto the stage to rescue the female performers. In fact, this staged performance foreshadows the moment in which Stewart grabs his axe and sets off to sever Ada's finger. But in this scene the Maori characters, relegated to the narratival margins, remain mere witnesses to his actions – once more misreading the signs. When Ada and her daughter arrive on the beach in New Zealand, a perplexed Maori character is seen rubbing his finger blindly across the words carved in the side of the wooden crate. Later on in the film a group of Maori men are caught violently thumping the keys of the piano in 'dumb' incomprehension.

In some scenes, however, there is a sense in which the Maori have written themselves back into the script. Early on in the film, when Stewart meets Ada on the beach he is followed about by a Maori character who stands behind him in a poked straw hat mimicking his actions. This character looks straight at the camera and our gaze is temporarily drawn away from Stewart, whose authority is undermined. This is the moment when we begin to perceive Stewart as the 'bad' colonial Other. Such examples, however, are rare, and on the whole the Maori characters remain marginal to the central narrative.

¹⁰ For example: *The Independent*, 17 October 1993; *The Guardian*, 22 and 29 October 1993; *The Sunday Times*, 31 October 1993; *Sight and Sound*, November 1993.

The Piano's critical reception in Britain was, almost without exception, ecstatic.¹⁰ It was hailed as a powerful and evocative exploration of Victorian sexual repression rather than as a

representation of colonialism. This aspect of the film was passed over because white settler colonialism remains an invisible or marginalized aspect of the British imperial project. The presence of black people in Britain has brought some parts of the Empire back to the imperial centre and thus foregrounded the colonial relationship with those places. However, with the exception of South Africa, the 'whiteness' of settler colonies, such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada, continues to be taken for granted. For example, while the anti-monarchist campaign in Australia receives media coverage in Britain because it is perceived to be of direct concern, postcolonial struggles over land rights tend to go unnoticed.

This invisibility also occurs in the field of postcolonial theory where the experiences of the African diaspora and the people of the Indian subcontinent have provided the spatial/historical focus for much important work, largely through the efforts of diasporic intellectuals such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha,¹¹ while the specificities of white settler colonialism and the relationship with 'first peoples', such as the Maori, the Aborigines and the native American Indians, continue to be peripheral within the field. As the Australian cultural critic Meaghan Morris argues:

Americans and Europeans often assume that we are abstracted like a footnote from their history and devoid of any complicating specificity in intellectual and cultural history.¹²

¹¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978); Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic* (London: Routledge, 1990); Homi Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990) and *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

¹² Meaghan Morris, 'Afterthoughts on Australianism', in *Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3 (1992), p. 471.

Representations of New Zealand in Britain, aside from tourist industry constructions of the place as an unspoilt nature park, are confined to media coverage of international sporting events and Royal visits. Coverage of these events often includes picturesque snapshots of Maori culture drawn from a limited repertoire of so-called 'traditional' forms, such as songs and dances. These representations are contained within a discourse which frames New Zealand as an ex-colony which has achieved racial harmony, a construction which has important resonances given that historically New Zealand has been known as the 'Britain of the South'. For example, much is made of the performance of the Maori war challenge, the *haka*, at the start of rugby internationals, which has been appropriated as a signifier of national identity. Here we have an example of the way in which the culture of the Maori is assimilated into a unifying notion of 'New Zealandness'; difference is elided into a mythologized sign of national unity.

The invisibility of white settler colonialism was exemplified by the way in which *The Piano* was marketed in Britain. Publicity material and media coverage constructed the film for its viewing public as an art-house movie about nineteenth-century sexual repression. This is not to imply that this entirely determines the way in which the film has been read by cinema audiences, but to suggest that the critical reception certainly contributes to the context within which audiences responded to the film. The focus on gender was heightened by media

interest in Jane Campion as ‘author’. The film’s accolades were those conventionally reserved for high cultural texts: Campion’s work was described in various broadsheet reviews as ‘lyrical’, ‘sensitive’, ‘original’ and ‘spiritual’. Her ‘romantic vision’ was compared to that of nineteenth-century writers such as the Brontë sisters and Emily Dickinson. The hyperbole surrounding the film’s release reached its peak in the *Independent on Sunday* which ran an extensive feature on Campion’s life and work. Having described her looks as ‘pre-Raphaelite’ (an unthreatening and fragile vision of white European femininity), it went on:

The Piano feels steeped in literary tradition, entirely original but rich in reverberations. It is *Wuthering Heights*, a romance of the soul with the wild New Zealand beaches and bush standing in for the stark moors. It’s Emily Dickinson, a romance of the soul . . . with its wavering between ecstasy and terror, eroticism and renunciation.¹³

¹³ *Independent on Sunday*, 17 October 1993.

¹⁴ For a discussion of these ‘privileging norms’ see B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths and H. Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 3.

¹⁵ Dyer, ‘White’, p. 45.

This critical acclaim not only ignored the film’s colonial setting but, by focusing on links between *The Piano* and the English literary canon, Campion and her work were appropriated as distinctly ‘European’. While this appropriation can be understood within the context of the relationship between the metropolitan centre and the periphery – historically the ‘privileging norms’ of the European cultural canon have defined ‘cultural value’ in the colonial context¹⁴ – it also seemed to consolidate the ‘whiteness’ of the text. In a sense, the critical reception reinforced the way in which ‘whiteness’ is universalized in the film. As Richard Dyer argues: ‘this property of whiteness to be everything and nothing is the source of its representational power’.¹⁵

The credits at the end of *The Piano* acknowledge the assistance of Maori ‘cultural advisers’. The use of ‘cultural advisers’ to guarantee the ‘authenticity’ of the Maori reinforces the discourses of primitivism in the film which construct the ‘indigenous’ people as the repository of unchanging traditional values – in harmony with nature, childlike – the textual echo of all that has been lost. This construction is reiterated in other texts connected with the film, for example in the production notes published along with the script where the ‘authenticity’ of the Maori on and off screen is discussed:

In common with his character Baines, Harvey Keitel was struck by the way in which the Maori cast, in role and out of role, tended to have a more profound relationship to the earth and the spirits than the *Pakeha* do. Keitel is quoted as saying: ‘I was very affected by Tungia, the woman playing Hira in the film. She came down to the beach and the first thing she did was cross to the sea, bend over and sprinkle herself with water. And I said “What are you doing” . . . and she said: “I’m asking the sea to welcome me”’.¹⁶

¹⁶ Campion, *The Piano*, p. 143.

The Maori are attributed with a timeless essence in *The Piano*; they are positioned as a collectivity outside of history. This primitive idealization provides the backdrop for the 'self-fashioning' of Ada McGrath and George Baines: Ada, whose colonial rite of passage enables her to discover her true femininity and Baines, who has undergone 'partial indigenization', reinvent themselves as born-again *pakeha*. *The Piano*, in restaging the colonial encounter, addresses the postcolonial anxieties of white New Zealand, the reworking of the nature/culture trope providing the means to represent and affirm a newly 'indigenized' national identity.

I would like to thank Lola Young for her support and encouragement.

Lips and fingers: Jane Campion's *The Piano*

SUE GILLETT

Language

Please don't misunderstand me. But do not try to understand me, if that means to know me in *your* way. This is not a language of surfaces to be staked and claimed.

I have not spoken since I was six years old. No one knows why, not even me. . . . The strange thing is I don't think myself silent, that is, because of my piano.¹

What is so wonderful about speaking? If I speak, out loud, I have to say what I mean. I grasp after the right word. I reach for the end of my sentence. For every word I utter, a thousand more clamour in contradiction. I fear the full stop as much as I long for it. In my speaking I hear the oceanic roar of a silence I try to drown.

Silence. Is there any such thing? Mute, tongue-tied, voices force themselves against the pores of my skin, will their opaque densities into elegant, arrow-smooth wisps seeking a route out of this heavy body. I wish for silence, a boundless emptiness. In my lip-closed stubbornness I feel the waves of language tunnelling through my skin, returning me to the surface. Silence is silence only for he who cannot hear. But even then, the silence disturbs, and whilst he would think of it as consent, another knowledge wars within him. He feels the strength of my resistance, pounding its silent language through his skull. 'I have to go, let me go.' I make no sound. He hears me.

If I open my lips will you take this as an invitation? If I open my lips will you step inside and take up residence? Must I keep opening my lips so that I can also show you the way out?

1 Ada's voiceover, *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993).

If I tighten my lips, each upon the other, will you turn away, as if from a closed door? If I tighten my lips, this one upon this one, will you hammer at me as at a door which is barred to you?

What are you waiting for me to say? What do you want to hear? Listening is an art. It is an act of love, requiring patience and courage.

Perhaps you do not know how to open me. Perhaps I do not know how to speak myself open. But one thing I know. I cannot be forced open. And I cannot be tempted. You would lose what you are trying to find and we would both be damaged.

Do not make me a whore. I gag on the word.

Her voice does not pass through her lips. She does not say what she means. She does not lie. She removes herself from yes or no. She refuses the language of entrances and exits and closing doors. She does not accommodate, does not house, shelter, sheath. Her silence restores the blood to her lips, restores the lips to her body. She refuses to give up her secrets.

'Just as the commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as image of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own.'² She looks at herself in a hand mirror. She lies down with her reflection and kisses her own lips. Seals her desire and pleasure. Her husband has boarded up the windows and doors of his house, confining her and her daughter within, trying to turn them into prisoners of the house, items of his property which must keep in the place he has given them. She subverts this attempted reduction of her being by amplifying her longing. She turns from the boarded windows to her own image reflected to her own eyes and so escapes, takes herself through the mirror beyond the house-prison. Reflecting herself back to herself she frustrates her husband; he can find no support for himself, for his image, in her. When he looks at her she looks back, piercingly. She will not be transparent. She will not dissolve into his imaginary. She disturbs the comfortable image he would have of himself, as a man. She unmans him.

'Woman's desire would not be expected to speak the same language as man's.'³ Her voice is in her fingers. She touches the keys of her beloved piano and summons her own rapture from its vibrating body. Her fingers motion through the air tossing signs to her daughter who catches them. She carves a message of love into a piano key. She holds a pencil. She caresses the body of her lover and her husband, tracing her passion upon their skin. Her husband finds such language shocking, threatening, incomprehensible. His body winces under the too gentle pressure of her fingertips. He is afraid to be touched . . . *a man who has lost all his skin*.⁴ Her lover thrills to the language which inhabits her. Jealously he wishes to be the piano, to be the receiver of such rapturous touching, to be played upon, to have such haunting

2 Luce Irigaray, 'Women on the market', in *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans Catherine Porter (New York: Cornell Press, 1985), p. 187.

3 Luce Irigaray, 'This sex which is not one', in *This Sex Which is Not One*, p. 206.

4 Sam Neill, from the Production Notes, quoted in Jane Campion, *The Piano* (London: Bloomsbury, 1993), p. 147.

Ada (Holly Hunter) and Baines (Harvey Keitel) in *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993). Picture courtesy: BFI Stills



music evoked in and through his own body, to tremble under the powerful cadences of her transcendence.

It is her finger which he chooses, her means of connection with language. It is no accident. The axe is brought down upon her index finger, index of her speech, sign of her tenderness. He has meant to clip her wing, to keep her on the ground. And as she lies in a faint, silenced in a way he understands, deprived, so he intends, of escape to her private innerness and flight, then, having radically reduced her state, having deprived her of resistance, he prepares to penetrate her. Now, in her absence, he *can* touch her.

I have been seduced by the depths. I have melted into them, hurtled into them. I have been so deeply immersed I could not remember the possibility of any other place. Within myself I have been out of reach, a sleepwalker who cannot be woken. It does not matter why. There

has been a need. I have also been dragged to the depths. I have felt the grip of the rope around my ankle, the crush of a wet crinoline shroud wrapping round the panic of my descent. My lungs demand air even as my piano is irresistibly drawn to the ocean floor. I have felt the tension in the rope which joins us. It is time to separate. From subterranean to surface. It is time to connect, to swim to the waiting boat. I have been to the soundless depths. It has taught me much. My lips part to gulp in breaths of light and sound. Hands meet, skins contact. I have berthed.

I am learning to speak. My sound is still so bad I feel ashamed. I practice only when I am alone and it is dark. I think of my piano, silent in its ocean grave. I am alive.

Masculinity/femininity/exchange

The Piano concludes with two contradictory visions of Ada. She is on the verandah of her house in Nelson, a veil covering her face, practising sounds in this temporary darkness. Baines lifts the veil and kisses her smiling mouth. It is a vision of domestic happiness. Feminist friends have criticized the film for offering this apparent return to sexual conventionality. Critics have complained of the ordinariness of the Nelson ending. Carmel Bird, for instance, claims:

it has the most incredibly weak conclusion. After all that promise of pounding seas and the female sexual symbolism of lonely and damaged pianos, it was a real let-down.⁵

As a revisioning of the female melodrama, however, it is fitting that *The Piano* should signify resolution through a return to a state of 'normality'. Surviving catastrophe, scarred but determined to face the challenges of a relationship, the couple are finally reunited, their misunderstandings, estrangements or separations now overcome. Bird's complaint reveals a preference for tragedy over melodrama, for death over compromise. Opposing romance, passion, sexuality and risk to marriage and domesticity, she reads the Nelson ending as weak, in the sense of a fall from the sublime to the mundane, and remains enthralled by the romance of asocial, individual heroism, suffering, genius and lonely passion – as if passion can only exist in the realm of private and socially subversive experience. Death and the unconscious tug seductively. Ada, in her sadness, is pulled in that direction and the film pulls us with her. But there is also a coexisting pull against the descent. In Jane Campion's words:

I think that the romantic impulse is in all of us and that we live it for a short time, but it's not part of a sensible way of living. It's a heroic path and it generally ends dangerously. I treasure it in the sense that I believe it's a path of great courage. It can also be the path of the foolhardy and the compulsive.⁶

5 Carmel Bird, 'Mysteries of a tale left lacking', *The Age* (22 March 1994), p. 15. In a further essay Bird admits to being disappointed that the film had not concluded with Ada's drowning: 'Ada and the piano sink into the sea with all the power of the unconscious mind of God. The tragedy, the glory, the moment. But suddenly Ada changes her mind, kicks off her boot, frees herself and is saved. I couldn't believe my eyes. . . . But it gets worse. In the house with the lace curtains Ada wears a floral dress . . . the dimension she has lost is striking. She has no finger, no style, and no guts.' Carmel Bird, 'Freedom of speech', in Cassandra Pybus (ed.), *Columbus' Blindness and Other Essays* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1994), p. 197.

6 Jane Campion, epigraph to the screenplay of *The Piano*.

Ada's choice – her will, as she puts it – is to live *in* the world, to come out from her various cages. For me, at least, the 'promise of pounding seas' is fulfilled by the ending of the film, by both its endings. Revisioning generic conventions, this marriage is not *the same* marriage: it is a new and transfiguring marriage. It replaces the marriage with Stewart but it also transforms the isolation and self-absorption of the heroine without, it should be added, effacing her subjectivity or forgetting her pain.

The seeming closure offered by the domestic ending is only temporary. It is immediately undercut by another vision: Ada's body is floating underwater above her piano, Victorian dress ballooning around her. The return to this second image, coming so soon after Ada's rescue from drowning, unsettles the happily-ever-after of the couple, not in that it forebodes an end to this happiness but in its recognition of the insistent presence of another territory and mode of experience. There is not so much a tension between the two images, awaiting resolution, as a balance. Ada has chosen life, and she has embraced that choice with surprised pleasure; but, as her final voiceover reminds us, accompanied as it is by a return to a now serene, soft focus image of her floating gracefully, peacefully attached to the piano-coffin by a taut rope, death still lies beneath or within this choice, has enabled this choice – is not, that is, in opposition to it.

At night I think of my piano in its ocean grave, and sometimes of myself floating above it. Down there everything is so still and silent that it lulls me to sleep.

The piano, linked now with death, is still linked with Ada. It is under the sea and it has allowed her to move on in her life, just as her 'death' has marked her passage into, and remains an undercurrent to, a new life.

Another point in defence of the Nelson ending is aimed more at the feminist rejection of melodrama's reunited, happy heterosexual couple. This rejection follows the paradigm which reads heterosexist ideology as carried by generic convention: marriage to a man is the only proper and satisfying goal for a woman. But, leaving aside the unsettling effect of the contrasting final scenes, to dismiss the formulaic 'happily ever after' as always heterosexist ideology is also to dismiss the possibility of positive changes within heterosexuality, to invoke a normalized and homogenous notion of heterosexual marriage and to deny the film's exploration of differences between men, instead rendering men substitutable.

Teresa de Lauretis has described the process by which women, narratively and Oedipally positioned as the passive destination awaiting the questing male subject, are *seduced into femininity*.⁷ Ada, however, is transformed through her own journey, making her own major decisions. It is she who decides to throw her piano overboard on the boat trip towards Nelson, and it is for herself, for her freedom

⁷ Teresa de Lauretis, 'Desire in narrative', in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 103–57.

that she does this – not to please her lover, not to make herself into what he would like (indeed he is perplexed by this command). In this non-Oedipal narrative Ada's alliance with a man is not conditional upon this seduction into femininity. It is her desire which motivates her choice. This choice has been the subject of much feminist debate. In a particularly angry letter to *Arena Magazine* Lisa Sarmas, responding to Kerryn Goldsworthy's favourable review of the film in an earlier issue, describes the film as misogynist: 'It wasn't rape – she wanted it all along. This is not an uncommon theme in current misogynist film fashion.'⁸ Goldsworthy's article is entitled 'What music is' and Sarmas challenges the focus of this title by replacing it with the corrective echo – 'What rape is' – as the title to her letter. Here, and within the letter, she accuses Goldsworthy of misnaming the events between Ada and Baines. She complains that 'Ada falls in love with her rapist' and that 'all she needed was a bit of prodding from Baines to awaken her inhibited sexuality'.⁹ I have encountered similar arguments following the presentation of versions of this article at feminist and cultural studies conferences. The problem is how to read Ada's choice. Is it a choice which shores up or challenges the patriarchal economy? Is her desire hers, or is it corrupted? Can woman have desire, for a man? Can she have desir-ing, or so-called active desire? Does the narrative performance of heterosexuality doom woman to masochistic desire, to de Lauretis's 'desire to be desired'?

The Piano interrogates the conventional expectations of femininity, masculinity and heterosexuality. Ada may return to an ordinary life, teaching piano, living with her family, learning to speak . . . but this is not to say that she has failed, that she has been reabsorbed into the familiar constraints of femininity. She achieves, rather than falls into, this ordinariness through her revolt against attempts to train her into docility: attempts made, in different ways, by both her husband and her lover. Her lover can only become her lover when he realizes that her docility and his domination is not what he wants. Returning the piano to her, bringing the bargaining to a premature conclusion, Baines says, 'I want you to care for me, but, you can't. . . . It's yours. Leave. Go now.' Contravening the Oedipal logic of desire, Baines comes to the realization that his desire, crucially, has the passive aim 'normally' allotted to woman. His desire is for her desire. Baines calls the bargain to end, realizing that he cannot buy, and Ada cannot sell, the personal connection, the experience of love, which he desires. Her desire, which he desires, does not exist in market terms: 'I am giving the piano back to you. I've had enough. The arrangement is making you a whore and me wretched.'

Irigaray writes: 'The economy of desire – of exchange – is man's business'.¹⁰ Baines experiences the poverty of this economy. He yields to this knowledge, allowing it to make him sick: 'Ada, I am unhappy because I want you, because my mind has seized on you and thinks of nothing else. This is how I suffer. I am sick with longing.' Baines's

⁸ Lisa Sarmas, 'What rape is,' *Arena Magazine*, no. 8 (December/January 1993), p. 14.

⁹ Ibid., p. 14. See also, Kerryn Goldsworthy, 'What music is,' *Arena Magazine* (October/November 1993), pp. 46–8.

¹⁰ Irigaray, 'Women on the market', p. 189.

¹¹ I would argue that this happens in a number of films, such as the very popular *The Crying Game*, or, more recently, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, which focus on gender ambiguities through the figure of the transvestite. See my 'She's not a woman like all the others: body politics in *Kiss of the Spiderwoman* and *The Crying Game*', in *Bring a Plate: Feminist Cultural Studies Conference Proceedings* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995 forthcoming).

experience of his own femininity does not lead to a usurping of the feminine for the bolstering of a threatened masculinity at the expense of the woman herself.¹¹ It is effected through both an imaginative inquiry into Ada's experience and an acceptance of his own lack of power with regard to the otherness presented by her, and leads him to turn away from the appropriative aims of a phallically defined masculinity. This gender ambiguity is not coded through overt signs of transvestism: he does not borrow the clothes of a woman in a process of becoming other. However Baines's tattooed face does mark him as already open at the borders of identity, as touched and altered by the encounter with identities other than that of the colonial master.

I am not condoning Baines's actions. I was quite disturbed by these scenes. The bargaining scenes are genuinely tense. They are not titillating. They are not easy. But this doesn't translate into rape or harrassment. We see, in its bare bones as it were, the economic relations which order sexual relations, the sexual relations which order economic relations. It is interesting that most people I have spoken to have been more shocked by the bargain between Ada and Baines than by that which orders Ada into her marriage. Yet Ada plays no part in negotiating the terms of the marriage contract: they are set before Ada arrives in New Zealand and before Stewart has even seen his betrothed. 'Today [my father] married me to a man I have not met.'

Luce Irigaray, in her dialogues with Levi Strauss and Marx, considers the exchange value of women:

Woman exists only as an occasion for mediation, transaction, transition, transference, between man and his fellow man, indeed between man and himself.¹²

As the object of exchange woman provides the basis for a hom(m)osocial economy, an economy in which women are reduced to commodities and excluded as subjects of commerce and owners of property.

This transformation of women's bodies into use value and exchange values inauguates the symbolic order . . . their nonaccess to the symbolic is what has established the social order.¹³

It is this economy which *The Piano* takes us through and beyond.

Ada, her consent not required, is exchanged between her father and her New Zealand husband. She arrives on the shore with her baggage, an item which is assessed as 'small' and 'stunted'. She is next exchanged, via her piano, between her husband and Baines. These deals are struck between men. When Ada forcefully protests at the second deal (Baines has 'bought' the piano from Stewart in exchange for land), writing the emphatic message 'The piano is mine. It's *mine*', her husband angrily appeals to conventional dogma: 'We are a family now, we all make sacrifices and so will you'. He treats the piano as he treats Ada – as his property. He still considers it in these terms later

¹² Irigaray, 'Commodities among themselves', in *This Sex Which is Not One*, p. 193.

¹³ Irigaray, 'Women on the market', p. 189.

when Baines has returned the piano to Ada. Continuing to view the piano as something between himself and Baines, a transaction between property owners – men, that is – reluctant to acknowledge that it is now something between *Ada* and Baines and nothing to do with himself at all, Stewart challenges the new arrangement: ‘and what does this do to our bargain?’. He is unsettled and reluctant to have his position in the exchange dyad apparently usurped by his wife. Baines has to emphasize that it is to Ada that he has given the piano. Stewart still tries to restore his position here, speaking for Ada – ‘I expect she will appreciate it’. Baines, however, does not overlook Ada’s ownership of the piano in the same way as Stewart. Neither do his conceptions of ownership or his mode of transaction remain static. He returns the piano to Ada before the terms of the bargain have been concluded, in effect revoking his rights to the exacting of such a contract. This decision (which returns Ada to the position of property owner) marks a turning point in her relationship with Baines. It enables the movement towards a more equal set of conditions being formed between them.

It is in the context of relations between Scots colonialists and the indigenous Maori people that these negotiations over property, gender identity and sexuality are played out. Important signifiers of the differences between Baines and Stewart are derived from British and Maori culture. Most striking, perhaps, are Baines’s tattooed face and Stewart’s rather silly top hat. Baines is also marked out from his countrymen by his use of the Maori language, his unpatronizing respect for their beliefs, and his friendships with Maori people. In contrast to the Stewart household where Maori girls are used as servants and trained into British dress and custom, Baines’s much more open house is visited by local Maoris who are often seen relaxing on his verandah and moving about his house. This openness to a culture not his own parallels Baines’s openness to the encounter with femininity. This is not to say that the Maori people themselves signify femininity: the signification occurs in the crossing, the openness, not in essence. Stewart’s defensive negotiation of his sexuality parallels his efforts to keep himself aloof from the Maori, untouched by, and ignorant of, their culture. He rigidly erects boundaries between himself and others along the lines of race and sex. Unlike Baines he is unwilling or unable to play with identity, to risk being unfixed, to leave his boundaries unprotected. The axe is his symbol. It cuts and divides. It helps him to mark out his territory, to build his fences, to deprive the Maori people of their land and Ada of her power. In other words, *The Piano* links sexual and racial structures of domination, exploitation and dispossession (without collapsing them into each other), tracing each to the defensive and repressive work of phallic masculine subjectivity.

The arena in which the drama of Ada’s and Baines’s affair is enacted is also at the edges of the colonial attempt to define a pure

space for the conventions of British social and sexual behaviour. In a way, then, the Maori land and culture provide a context and imagery for the lawlessness of Ada's and Baines's behaviour. A space must be found or created, shared and not stolen, in which the territory between themselves, man and woman, may be explored. This space is not marked, in a racist fashion, as primitive. It is a space of difference, a *between* space, traversed by encounters between different cultures, different sexes, different languages, different desires. Within this space the piano is a charged symbol of these traversals, its music an expression of the passage to places which cannot be seized or owned.

14 John Spooner, 'Tender, but it's still harassment', *The Age* (22 March 1994), p. 15.

15 John Spooner, for instance, describes *The Piano* as 'a tale of sexual harassment presented as romantic entertainment.' He goes on to invoke the name of Camille Paglia as the only possible reference point for those who might defend the film's sexual politics, thus leaving feminists such as myself stranded between the opposed positions of antifeminism and liberal feminist reform.

John Spooner complains that Baines only looks good because Stewart looks so bad.¹⁴ Admittedly, my own analysis runs the risk of supporting this view since I have been comparing the two characters, one against the other. However, my argument is less concerned with judging the men, especially in such opposed terms, as it is with articulating the film's referents for violence and attempted rape. What concerns me, then, are the functions played by Baines and Stewart in the film's attempt to envision an economy of sexual difference in which a woman's desire is able to circulate. Baines uses his knowledge that the piano belongs to Ada (and not simply as a possession) in order deliberately to manipulate her. It is the bait with which he tries to catch her. This is the dangerous territory of sexual politics which the film explores and, as I have indicated, some viewers have applied terms such as 'sexual harassment' and 'rape' to the exploitative actions of Baines.¹⁵ I think, however, that these terms are misplaced. The film provides another referent for rape against which the actions of Ada and Baines are thrown into relief. Stewart on two occasions tries to force Ada to have sex. On the first occasion he chases her through the bush, hunts her as if she is a wild animal, tears at her clothes and uses his physical strength to wrestle her to the ground. The second occasion I have already described. His wife is unconscious. But Stewart is not simply the villain of the piece. To cast him as such is to ignore the film's attention to his subjective experience, his feminization and his exploitation. Like Baines, Stewart is also overwhelmed by a passive desire: 'Do you like me?' he helplessly asks Ada. By contrast, however, he responds to this experience with confusion and repressive force. He is presented as an 'ordinary' man trying to live in conformity with his culture, driven to his actions by the 'ordinary' demands of his western rational masculinity, demands that he experience his sexed identity through an acquisitive, proprietorial relationship to nature, women and other races. He is not just a straw man, illustrative and representative of bourgeois patriarchal masculinity; his struggles are important and poignant. Whilst he resorts to brutal actions he is not simply a brute, he is a Victorian man demanding a husband's rights. Whilst in no way condoning his actions, we can nonetheless understand the constraints operating upon his experiences of sexual identity and his expectations

¹⁶ Anna Murdoch King, 'A man for woman of our times', *The Age* (22 March 1994), p. 15.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, from 'Difference', in Anthony Easthope and Kate McGowan (eds), *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader* (North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992), pp. 108-33.

¹⁸ Take, for instance, the scene in which a standing and fully dressed Ada runs her finger down Stewart's naked and trembling recumbent body. She does not allow him to move or to touch her.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Ward, *Father/Daughter Rape* (London: Women's Press, 1984), p. 118.

²⁰ Goldsworthy, 'What music is', p. 47.

of a sexual relationship. Baines and Stewart are both complex characters, set in realistic social and historical and geographical situations, who are in the process of negotiating their gender and sexuality through confrontations with their feelings. The successful man is the one who can take up the challenge of this negotiation, who can be, as Anna King Murdoch puts it, 'tortured by love',¹⁶ who can become open to his vulnerability.

The Piano does not present masculinity and femininity as polar opposites but rather, in the Derridean sense,¹⁷ as categories achieved through repudiation of each other. Stewart's response to his feminization at Ada's hands is fear, disavowal and retaliation. In defence against his own castration and Ada's phallic presumption,¹⁸ he attempts to reverse the situation and restore the masculine and feminine to a binaristic opposition by twice attempting rape and by symbolically chopping off Ada's finger. In feminist psychoanalytic terms Stewart attempts to perform the work of agent for the patriarchal Symbolic Order, an Order, according to Luce Irigaray, in which man is the One and woman is *not* One. Baines and Ada, however, must work out their relationship *beyond* the laws of heterosexuality and marriage and beyond a binaristic division of sexual difference. The bargain is crucial here and it is misleading to read the 'deal' as rape. Rape, according to Ward, is 'the experience of powerlessness, of being conquered. The conquered territory is our own bodies'.¹⁹ Associated with these concepts of conquest and powerlessness are the notions of force, coercion and violence. A woman's powerlessness, in rape, is forced upon her. Her capacity to effectively assert her resistance is wrested from her. Certainly Ada's capacity to make a choice is constrained and she is also deliberately manipulated. This man has her piano. She wants it back. But choices always do take place within certain limits. The fact that these limits are patriarchal in their nature does not necessarily equate the events which take place with rape. As uncomfortable as this may be for audiences, Ada does make a choice, a measured choice. It is possible for her to leave. Importantly, she is not powerless; even whilst she is not standing on equal ground with this partner, Ada is not conquered. She enters into an agreement in which she sets some of the terms. As Kerryn Goldsworthy says: 'Ada beats him down – no mean feat, for a woman who does not speak – to less than half: one visit for every black key'.²⁰

The Piano affected me very deeply. I was entranced, moved, dazed. I held my breath. I was reluctant to re-enter the everyday world after the film had finished. *The Piano* shook, disturbed and inhabited me. I felt that my own dreams had taken form, been revealed. I dreamed of Ada the night after I saw the film. These were thick, heavy and exhilarating feelings. The problem with reading *The Piano* through the questions concerning rape or sexual harassment is that it then becomes extremely difficult to appreciate and articulate this powerful

affective dimension of the film. The legal definitions of what constitutes rape continue to be an important part of feminist work. However, *The Piano* offers other readings than those based on a legalistic discourse. It is able to offer female spectators a kind of sympathetic engagement with and confirmation of their subjectivities along with an escape from the usual sorts of containment they receive in patriarchal cinema. *The Piano* is not simply a story told from a woman's point of view. Other points of view are also given expression. It is a story which envisions the 'logical' drama of external events, interactions and exchanges as interwoven with a counterforce of inexpressible but nonetheless tangible passions. This is more than a two-tiered layering of conscious and unconscious realms within the subject. The ocean and Ada's music provide different, rhythmical analogies for this relationship. Whilst it visits psychoanalytic regions, *The Piano* moves beyond the familiar Oedipal terrain, immersing us both visually and aurally in a watery, muddy, semiotic imagery of maternal, nostalgic longing. Ada's desire both emerges within this female imagery/imaginary and remains in excess of the narrative circumstances in which she must also move. *It is a weird lullaby and so it is.*

Beginning

Hoop girl, you dwell in me. I also love another. Angel, do not betray me. Go between us as my whispering hands go between our two minds, as your body was first formed between ours.

Mudstuck girl, blood thick stories stick to our boots. Perform your dance around me, my seahorse, and speak in all our tongues. We have always spoken and yet, we must learn to speak, to each other and outside our circle.

Mother, I am your song, your lips. Your fingers trace the curves of my speech. I am your echo.

Carry your song beyond me, daughter. It is ours. I will hear.

reviews

review:

Sue Harper, *Picturing the Past: the Rise and Fall of the British Costume Film*. London: British Film Institute, 1994, 239pp.

SARAH STREET

- 1 Particularly, 'Gainsborough costume melodrama', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987), pp. 167–96, and 'Studying popular taste: British historical films in the 1930s', in Richard Dyer and Ginette Vincendeau, *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 101–11.
- 2 Marcia Landy deals with Harper's costume films across four different categories: the historical film, the woman's film, tragic melodramas and family melodramas, in *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930–1960* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

Sue Harper has produced the definitive version of research previously published in various collections.¹ Her focus is on the representation of history in British films of the 1930s and 1940s, concentrating on films which used the past as their setting in what she broadly terms 'the costume film'. Her book not only signals a welcome attention to genre in studies of British film² but also displays an impressive use of primary sources including the records of the Foreign Office, the Ministry of Information, the Board of Trade, the Executive Committee of the British Film Producers' Association and Mass Observation. All are deployed judiciously in an attempt to analyse the fascinating and at times contradictory dynamic between producers, official bodies and the audience in a period when the costume film performed a variety of functions:

It permitted notions of national consciousness to be perceived in a new and vital way. It reassessed certain historical periods and recuperated them for new purposes, and it captured the past as a site of fantasy in a period where other 'fantastic' modes were not markedly successful. It never reflected history, but produced symbolic readings of it which were always, as it were, at a tangent from reality (p. 188).

The last point is particularly crucial for Harper's thesis: in its most popular manifestations, the costume film used history to address contemporary anxieties and repressions, exploring the past not so much as another country than as familiar territory.

Where Harper is at her best is when she traces the *processes* involved in this appropriation of history, grounding her astute readings of films firmly in their social and historical contexts. The story is not a simple one, involving as many heroes and villains as a melodramatic plot. Operating from a rhetorical position of hypersensitivity about 'the national interest' many governmental and quasi-official bodies cared about how history was portrayed on screen. Harper's analysis of institutions which sought to influence commercial producers reveals that some were more powerful than others, with mostly negative results. Ironically, the most decisive official intervention was from the Foreign Office, which gave preferential treatment to Alexander Korda, producer of popular, inaccurate histories which privileged excess and female sexuality (precursors of Gainsborough films) from the 1930s, particularly *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), to popular successes like *Lady Hamilton* (1941). By contrast, the Ministry of Information discouraged the use of history as propaganda in World War II, while in the postwar period producers were freer from external pressures and more able to deploy history as they chose. Although historical films received attention from the Historical Association and Government Departments on account of their assumed responsibility to render accurate accounts of key moments in the development of 'national consciousness', it is clear from Harper's account that in many cases the most important variable was producers' readings of popular taste.

A wide range of producers is examined (including US companies who operated in Britain, mostly producing unsuccessful historical films) in terms of their ability to respond to the public mood. The most successful at the box office displayed an astute sense of judgement regarding the contemporary needs of the audience in their deployment of the costume film. Some clear 'winners' emerge: Alexander Korda, the Gainsborough production team (particularly those working in the art department) and The Archers (Powell and Pressburger). Harper's analysis of the contrasting studio policies of Ealing and Gainsborough is particularly illuminating. Michael Balcon sought to express his vision of realism and middle-class respectability in the historical films produced at Ealing. Ealing's historical films were popular among audiences who craved assurance that the status quo was invulnerable. By contrast, directors and art directors at Gainsborough were free to experiment and indulge their hunches about more extreme popular desires (particularly of female audiences) for historical inaccuracy, lavish costumes with nods to contemporary fashion trends, and a preference for 'wicked ladies' as major protagonists. Even though the scripts of Gainsborough films were often conservative, punishing deviant females like Barbara in *The Wicked Lady* (Leslie Arliss, 1945) or Hester in *The Man In Grey* (Leslie Arliss, 1943) 'in a rhetoric of disdain towards their working-class female audience' (p. 126), Harper shows how the art directors,

particularly John Bryan who worked on *The Wicked Lady* and *Caravan* (Arthur Crabtree, 1946), presented the audience with a transgressive visual discourse which privileged pleasurable looking, excess and exoticism, thereby inviting oppositional readings of the films. Drawing on a wide range of source material on contemporary audience reactions, Harper concludes that instead of reflecting the scriptwriters' middle-class concerns, the films instead provided a 'temporary imaginary location where marginal groups could experience that pleasure and confidence which were normally the prerogative of those who made the rules' (pp. 185–6).

Harper includes some detailed textual analyses in support of her argument. Her discussion of the function of costume in *The Wicked Lady*, for example, reveals how Elizabeth Haffenden's designs celebrated sexual difference and sexuality by insisting on simple but crucial details. When Margaret Lockwood makes her first appearance, Haffenden insisted that her velvet, fur-trimmed coat boasted a scarlet silk lining, even though the film was shot in black and white. In a context of wartime rationing, the costumes displayed an extravagant flamboyance and symbolic fantasy which anticipated the arrival of the New Look in the postwar period. Until a change in production management at Gainsborough in 1946, the ascendancy of quality-realist criticism and the emergence of films which dealt directly with the war, the exuberant costume film thwarted critical disdain and performed the crucial function of providing symbolic expression for a huge sigh of postwar relief.

The 'losers' who failed to judge the needs of the audience as well as Korda and Gainsborough are in many ways as interesting for what they tell us about the producer–officialdom–audience dialectic. Harper grants as large a role in her analysis to the 'blind alleys' and 'lost causes' of historical filmmaking as she does to successful producers and directors. Such a comprehensive approach is also extended to institutions like the Historical Association which failed to influence commercial production. Although historical films could be expensive, they scored high as a percentage of overall production before 1950. Harper argues that apart from their obvious popularity, producers were drawn to them because 'history was the most vital persuasive tool then at their disposal, which they deployed in an attempt to gain an audible voice in the prevailing babble of cultural forms' (p. 182). Producers who failed at the box office often did so because their films did not interweave issues of class and gender explicitly or implicitly. Thus, in the 1930s, Korda, Balcon and Wilcox (winners) responded in different ways to these issues, whereas Basil Dean and Julius Hagen (losers) did not. In the postwar period, Gainsborough responded to contemporary concerns about class and gender, as did Powell and Pressburger. Another recipe for success was to draw upon a particularly relevant historical period which was popular in historical novels; for example, the Regency period was used astutely by Korda

in *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (Harold Young, 1935), as was the Restoration by Herbert Wilcox in *Nell Gwyn* (1934).

Other directors failed to tap into these concerns but still managed to produce popular historical films. Harper suggests persuasive reasons for successful films which cannot be described as historical spectacles in the Gainsborough sense. *Tudor Rose* (Robert Stevenson, 1936) was a box-office success because it celebrated bourgeois ethics of restraint and duty, as did *Victoria the Great* (Herbert Wilcox, 1937) which Harper interprets as reflective of a populace who wanted their confidence in the monarchy restored after the Abdication Crisis, and their fears of anarchy quelled in an aura of patriotism and celebration of the proletarian-monarchist alliance. *Great Expectations* (David Lean, 1946) combined realism with visual sumptuousness and drew on the 'folk' elements of Dickens which are embedded in popular culture. *Hamlet* (Laurence Olivier, 1948) with its 'quality' resonances, was marketed in a particularly successful way by del Guidice at Two Cities. But, although significant, according to Harper these films cannot be identified as belonging to the longest, most consistent popular trajectory of sumptuousness and celebration of female pleasure which began with *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and ended with *Caravan*.

All this is suggestive of the rich potential of Harper's research methods regarding other popular genres, stars whose careers encompassed several different genres, strategies of 'intertextual relay' in the marketing of particular films, production environments and generally more contextual studies based on primary sources. By concentrating on female box-office preferences she suggests, for example, how similar work might be extended to analyse male enthusiasms which as far as the historical film was concerned appear to have been dominated by a concern for accuracy and realism. Above all, I am left with an intense flavour of the pains and pleasures of historical research: Harper being promised access to documents of the Art Director's Guild only to discover that they had been destroyed the previous week; quirky period details like the irate *Film Weekly* reader who spotted 'incorrectly cropped dogs' ears' in a historical film (p. 59); the woman who was shaken to 'the depths' by the 'thud-thud of tom-toms' when she saw *King Solomon's Mines* (Robert Stevenson, 1937) (p. 60). The range of Harper's scholarship is enormous, no stones unturned in a model example of the exacting and exciting combination of textual analysis, archive research and an appropriate methodology. *Picturing the Past* is also written with wit, verve and insight which pervades Harper's approach to a mammoth and invaluable task.

review:

Richard Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema 1896–1914*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993, 568pp.

Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema, 1930–1960*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993, 485pp.

SUSAN HAYWARD

There is an acknowledged dearth of in-depth studies written in English on the French film industry, whether it be from the point of view of the history of its production practices or the typology of films produced. These two recent books, which address very different moments in French cinema history, go some way towards filling this lacuna. As can be deduced from their very length (both around the five hundred page mark) these two texts are nothing if not encyclopaedic; in that respect they are invaluable reference works, and often intriguing in the information they provide. For example, Crisp notes, in a fascinating section on lighting and composition, how Gabin and Morlay preferred to be lit by Kruger who was well-known for favouring the violent contrastive lighting of the German Expressionist style (pp. 376, 383). And, through his analysis of films from 1904–7, Abel relocates the emergence of the system of narrative continuity within the work of Pathé (around 1906) rather than attributing it, as historians have consistently done, to the US production companies Vitagraph and Biograph (p. 104).

Readers have learnt to expect thorough scholarship with an Abel text.¹ They will not be disappointed with this latest offering on the silent cinema period. In his Preface, Abel acknowledges that he had too cursorily accepted given assumptions about this earliest time in French cinema history. And his intention with this new volume is to offer ‘an extensive excavation and reassessment of the French cinema

¹ See Abel's exemplary study of the later period of silent cinema, *French Cinema: The First Wave 1915–1929* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

between 1896 and 1914' (p. xiii). In this respect, Abel aims not only to provide a companion text to his earlier investigation of the 1915–29 period, but also to assert the importance of this period in film history when France, particularly Pathé, led the world in film production and was at the forefront of production practices.

In this volume, Abel carefully develops and defends his central thesis that the cinema of this period witnessed the evolution from a cinema of attractions to a narrative cinema. He traces in minute detail the evolving nature of the cinematic practices of representation and narration. Thanks to his precision we, as readers, come to learn a great deal about not just the progress in production practices but how films came to express meaning thanks to the evolution and experimentation in the use of shots and editing styles. Abel's book provides an invaluable recording of what film material is left (or has so far been unearthed). He details the content and construction of the films in such a fulsome manner that they come visually to life.

In this volume, unlike the earlier one, Abel attempts to set the films of this period in their social context and in relation to the ideology of the Third Republic and to read them against the social and political concerns of the time. On the whole, this part of his analysis is quite successfully accomplished. Occasionally, however, particularly when referring to racism or gender issues, his readings suffer from a relative naivete – at least from the vantage of hindsight. To cite an illustrative example: in talking about *Vengeance de nègre* (1906) he concludes '[d]espite its rough attempt to promote racial equality, this film is caught in a vicious circle – not only does it recirculate the stigma of blackness, but it demonizes a woman in the process' (p. 113). This statement seems not to take into account the fact that 'otherness' in the form of the representation of blacks or women gets notoriously poor treatment in French cinema until very recent times. Still on this question of historical contextualization, which is the only area with which I take issue, it seems fair to say that it could have benefited from more in-depth mapping. Too many of the contextualized readings are reduced to three or four essential points. Thus films are read as reflecting a white male-dominated society, the ideology of the Third Republic, the Nationalist Revival movement, and so on. And yet the issues of legitimacy that circulated around such concepts as Republicanism, anti-Republicanism and bourgeois ideology on the one hand, and, on the other, the sociological fact and perceived threat of an increasingly urban working class were all extremely complex ones that inflected the political culture of that age.

There is no faulting Abel, however, on his meticulous archival work on the films themselves. And a welcome dimension to his study is that he remains always mindful of practices being followed by the US film industry which was, after all, trying to gain world supremacy over the French. Thus, he is careful to point out when and where France did or did not follow felicitous strategies. Abel shows how this earliest

cinema moved from a tableau type of mise-en-scène, with long shots and very little editing, to a more dynamic editing style with shot variation. He also makes the point that, even as late as the 1911–14 period, directors still seemed reluctant to completely forego the tableau – presumably because of its economy in creating depth within the image. But, as Abel makes clear, this was a conservative practice which made the French product visually slow in relation to its US rival. Abel also maps the evolution towards the multi-reel feature film which was adopted as a ploy to stave off US competition and stem the popularity of its one-reelers (the USA's indigenous market was still primarily the nickelodeon at this juncture, and it exported these cheap products with huge success). Abel details the consequences this new departure had on the representational system and the strategies the industry had to adopt. For example, certain genres were more appropriate than others – hence the rise in favour of the historical film. How to package previously popular genres such as crime films or comedy so as to guarantee their sustained appeal led producers/directors to rethink the system of narration: either ending a reel on a cliff-hanger or starting a new part of the narrative before the reel came to an end. The other, hidden purpose behind this strategy was to wrest control from exhibitors who had traditionally re-cut the one-reelers.

Abel also introduces, albeit in a speculative manner, the question of audience address and the composition of audiences. Certain categories of film, genres even, suggest to Abel that audience targeting was a practice already in place by the beginning of the 1900s. Two generic types stand out in this domain. Melodramas set in bourgeois *milieux* and centred on women characters, and comedies centred on a child star. It seems, then, that it is possible to talk both of gendered audiences and of women's films. Similarly, Abel adds, one could speculate on the existence of a child audience. Throughout his book, Abel suggests that the industry had an attentive eye to the fact that audiences were composite factors of class, gender and generation and in his Afterword he proposes that this area is one that really merits research. Indeed, it is possible – and to be hoped – that this mapping of further research areas will become a further Abel volume.

Colin Crisp's book offers the first full-scale investigation, written in English, into the French film industry of the thirty year period of the so-called classical cinema (1930–60). In fact, it is the first of its kind to bring together in such detailed fashion the very varied pre-existing documentation on this period in French cinema history. For the most part the book is well organized and provides a full mapping of the political economy of the industry as well as work and production practices. The prime motivation of Crisp's book is to demonstrate how this classical cinema is first and foremost a by-product of the French cinema industry's global practices, but that these film products cross-fertilize back into the industry and affect practices. As he ably argues, it is these practices which give this cinema its French specificity.

However, he also makes it clear that this cinema is not purely and simply an indigenous product. Other cross-fertilizations, such as the different waves of political *émigrés* from other European nations which brought film technicians, decorators, lighting and camera expertise to the industry, as well as producers and directors, represented important contributing factors to this age of cinema. Nor does Crisp neglect the impact of Hollywood as both a predator on and a renovating force for the indigenous industry.

Crisp brings together in one single volume the entire existing exegesis on the French cinema industry of this period. But this does not mean that he does not review earlier analyses critically. For example, he takes issue with and refutes (quite rightly to my mind) the French historians Jeancolas's and Siclier's assertion that the 1940–44 period belongs to the 1930s. He argues that 1941 heralded a radical change in the organization of the industry (economically as well as in terms of production practices). Thanks to industrial legislation introduced by the Germans during the Occupation, a framework was put in place that consolidated the industry. This legislation, which essentially professionalized the industry, served as the foundation for postwar classical cinema.

It is in this context of professionalization that Crisp makes the important point that the concomitant formalization of structures brought about by legislation in fact brought about a progressive deprofessionalization within the industry. The unionization of technicians and workers led to a different type of relationship within production. The move was towards a producer-package rather than a director-package system as it had been in the 1920s and 1930s. The relationship became very much one of employer/employee (p. 201). Thus the earlier artisanal group practice of filmmaking was replaced by a more formalized hierarchical system that was producer-led. By the 1950s this had led to quite conservative practices throughout the industry which manifested themselves most clearly through the products put up on screen. This conservatism was the one against which the *Cahiers du cinéma* railed. And it is here that Crisp remarks that, if anything, the New Wave cinema is one that emerges as a reaction to this formalization but is also one which owes much, in terms of heritage, to the earlier classical cinema practices of the 1930s. In this respect, the New Wave can be seen as reintroducing one of French cinema's specificities: an artisanal non-conformism to dominant modes of production.

The chapter that works the least well to my mind is the one entitled 'Formations of audiences'. Instead of examining precise statistics as to audience formations, Crisp turns his attention to the different extra-diegetic texts (which range from fanzines to serious reviews that tackle the theoretical debates) that, it could be argued, were used to generate mass and speciality audiences. One could also suggest that it is a pity that Crisp does not challenge the view held by theorists of the

1940s and 1950s that there was no theoretical debate during the 1930s – when of course there was one which centred around the sociopolitical function of realism. And, in general, more reference to popular cinema and less adherence to the canons and canonical reading of French cinema would have been welcome.

However, Crisp's last chapter 'Work practices and stylistic change' is a tour de force. All one could want to know about the work of the technicians and designers – whom Crisp rightly acknowledges as having at least as much, if not more, importance than the film director – is spelt out here in brilliant detail. The implications of their craft for the look of French cinema of the classical period and for strategies of performance and the creation of star personas are examined with dazzling clarity and fulsomely illustrated with citations from the practitioners themselves.

Histories of the cinema industries are vital forces and sources to an understanding of the products that emanate from them. So too are analyses of the many other contexts which surround production. In the context of French cinema, Abel's and Crisp's work in this area is, therefore, of paramount importance. Abel has mooted which other areas need investigating within his own field of scholarship, the silent period. Similarly, Crisp's book anticipates the need for a second volume to complement this one, which will deal with the recent history of the French film industry from 1960 to the 1990s. It is noteworthy that French film historians are also spreading their net of investigation wider to incorporate a cultural studies approach. This new departure undoubtedly comes about as a result of studies of the kind conducted by Abel and Crisp, and represents a significant and vital shift in French scholarship. It also means, amongst other things, that audience attendance and reception – still in their infancy in France – will soon find a place in the scholarly arena.

review:

Ellen Seiter, *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993, 257pp.

LESLIE FELPERIN

Across the media and around the world, conceptions of childhood have been going through a remarkable upheaval of late. In the face of moral panics provoked by events such as the Jamie Bulger case and the Michael Jackson scandal, it becomes all the more necessary to forsake hysteria and attempt to understand children's culture with as much detachment and sympathy as possible. Ellen Seiter's *Sold Separately: Parents and Children in Consumer Culture* is a welcome contribution to the sparse but growing body of academic criticism which deals with children and the commodities and forms of entertainment addressed to them. Eschewing the moralism and snobbery that usually accompanies analyses of children's entertainment, Seiter historicizes and investigates her subject from several angles, delineating both the empowering aspects of such entertainment, as well as its problematic propensity for racial and gender stereotyping. Above all, Seiter is sensitive to the relationship between class and childrearing. She writes in the Introduction of how her interest in the subject was germinated by her sudden awareness during her own pregnancy of the wealth of media and commodities targeting of parents. The book constitutes an attempt

to move back and forth between two perspectives: that of privileged children like my own, with money to spend and confidence that their desires really count and deserve gratification; and that of children . . . whose circumstances do not resemble those of the media world, who participate much more marginally in the

consumer economy of childhood, and who have faced at a young age the frequent and abrupt denial of their desires (p. 3).

Above all, her book emphasizes the interaction of parents and children as joint, codependent and at times antagonistic consumers. The scope of Seiter's analysis, in addition to its lucid and accessible prose style, makes this compelling reading for the general parenting public as well as researchers interested in the field.

The book takes an eclectic approach, and covers a broad range of cultural production. Seiter concedes in the Introduction that her 'sampling methods have not been scientific, but [her] samples have been sizable' (p. 4). The opening chapter is the most theoretically meaty. It draws substantially from a variety of sources (including Daniel Miller on material culture, Robert Hodge's and David Tripp's semiotic approach to children's television, and Pierre Bourdieu's theories of taste and cultural capital) in order to elucidate domestic consumption and the debates around children's pleasure. Gracefully juggling potentially conflicting perspectives, Seiter succeeds in laying a strong theoretical foundation for her subsequent analysis. Her central hypothesis is that 'Children's interest in consumer culture involves much more than greed, hedonism, or passivity: it involves the desire for community and for utopian freedom from adult authority, seriousness, and goal directedness' (p. 50). Chapter two contextualizes children's consumer culture, surveying toy advertising from the 1920s to the present in magazines such as *Parents*. Seiter draws out the subtly shifting paradigms underlying the cheerful slogans and homely compositions, which illustrate the changing notions of the utility of play.

In the next two chapters, Seiter strives to maintain a balance between validating children's pleasure in the medium and recognizing advertising's often reactionary ideological underpinnings. First, in chapter three, she contrasts the positions of campaigners against commercial television, led by the Action for Children's Television (ACT), and the advertising industry itself. She takes ACT to task for 'its idealist vision of childhood, its simplistic advocacy of "good" culture – as universal and self-evident – over mass culture, and its facile distinctions between the commercial and the artistic, and the worthwhile and the merely sensually pleasurable' (p. 97). Moreover, middle-class pressure groups like ACT posit children as passive spectators, while advertisers recognize their audience as 'savvy', media-literate, and often fickle consumers. Seiter sees this model of the child consumer as 'much closer to reality than ACT's image of the innocent child' (p. 106), and in chapter four she delineates how the utopian, grown-up-free zone presented in advertising might appeal to young viewers, especially as it validates the peer-group at the expense of parental power. At the same time, she is highly critical of advertising's tendency to give starring roles to white male children at the expense of female children and children of colour.

Seiter's textual analysis is perceptive and well-judged here, and dovetails smoothly with close readings she conducts in the next two chapters, entitled 'Toy-based videos for girls' and 'Action TV for boys'. In the former, she mounts a spirited defence of videos like *My Little Pony*, *The Care Bears Movie*, and *Rainbow Brite*, all of which were designed to complement and promote lines of toys marketed at little girls during the late 1980s. Tom Engelhardt is one of the few writers to take any notice of these videos, denouncing them as cynical marketing ploys in a vicious (but very funny) article back in 1987.¹ Seiter reads these attacks as paralleling the denigration often heaped on women's genres like soap operas. She defends the videos on the grounds that, like soap operas, these videos provide a female-centred world with which girls can identify and means by which they can exorcize feelings of worthlessness and guilt, themes often central to these narratives. As she does throughout the book, Seiter notes how entertainment like this, garish and seemingly downmarket, becomes embroiled in aesthetic arguments about taste that are ultimately class-based.

Sold Separately is rather less sympathetic to male-centred cartoons like *The Real Ghostbusters* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. As with chapter four on advertisements, the bulk of the analysis concerns itself with chastising the programmes for marginalizing female and ethnic characters and relying excessively on brute force and violence as a means of resolving narrative conflict. At this point, Seiter's argument seems perilously close to slipping into the kind of middle-class, normative discourse that she so scrupulously avoids elsewhere. A more constructive reading might have accessed recent reassessments of masculinity in order to understand the pleasures invoked by these kind of representations.

The final chapter, focusing on the highly successful international chainstore Toys "R" Us, neatly ties several of the book's strands together. The social and economic effects of cultural capital, marketing strategies, children's desires and parents' anxieties are all played out in the toyshop. Seiter's deconstruction of Toys "R" Us and the new 'yupmarket' toyshops like the Early Learning Centre is especially interesting, suggesting how cultural capital is enunciated through spatial organization and business practice.

Children's entertainment has until recently been one of the most neglected areas of academic investigation. *Sold Separately* is a fine contribution to the field, judiciously weighing up and negotiating between the viewpoints of parents, critics, pressure groups, advertisers, toy sellers and manufacturers. However, the most glaringly absent voice remains that of children themselves. This seems to be an even more curious omission considering that Seiter's previous work, in *Remote Control*,² drew extensively from interviews with soap opera viewers. Admittedly, children make difficult interviewees, often inarticulate and/or eager to provide the answers they think

1 Tom Engelhardt, 'Children's television: the strawberry shortcake strategy', in Todd Gitlin (ed.), *Watching Television: a Pantheon Guide to Popular Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1987).

2 Ellen Seiter, Hans Borchers, Gabriele Kreutner, and Eva-Maria Warth, *Remote Control: Television, Audiences and Cultural Power* (London: Routledge, 1989).

³ Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: from Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); David Buckingham (ed.), *Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

interviewers are looking for, a point Seiter acknowledges. Yet some attempts have been made already to use children's own assessments to aid explication, notably Marsha Kinder's *Playing with Power* and the collection of essays in David Buckingham's *Reading Audiences*.³ Both draw methodologically from a combination of textual analysis, psychoanalysis and ethnographic research, and are two of the more exemplary works in this field. Nonetheless, for all their merits, studies such as these are problematic, combining as they do potentially contradictory methodologies. *Sold Separately* plays it safe by sticking primarily to close textual analysis as the main critical tool. This produces a more consistent critical practice, but also a more monologic one, denying expression to those for whom it seeks to speak – child spectators – while often quoting the parents. Then again, just as parents are the ones who buy toys, aside from libraries and academics, they are also the consumers most likely to purchase this book.

review:

Kevin Jackson (ed.), *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1993, 312pp.

PHILIP SIMPSON

Who cares about Humphrey Jennings now? If this English filmmaker is remembered, it is probably only by those who have a professional interest in documentary cinema. Perhaps four films, *Spare Time* (1938), *Listen to Britain* (1942), *Fires Were Started* (1943) and *A Diary for Timothy* (1945–6), of the twenty-four he worked on as director, have titles which would be widely known to an international academic community. Kevin Jackson argues that Jennings should be better known, and not simply as a filmmaker. To this end, the Reader brings together Jennings's critical writings, some of his broadcasts, a selection of his poetry, letters and film treatments, and a few stills and photographs. The book lays no claim to be definitive: the reasons for the many cuts in the letters are not given, there is no bibliography through which to locate some of the suggestive comments cited in Jackson's Introduction, and the index is no more than a list of names and films. A Reader for the common reader, perhaps, without a critical perspective which might have brought the intriguing figure behind all this material into sharper focus.

On the face of it, Jennings ought to have been a contradictory figure. A Cambridge intellectual who helped to organize the Surrealist Exhibition of 1936, he also worked with Charles Madge and Tom Harrisson, in the same year, to set up the first Mass Observation project which collected reports from 'ordinary' people about quotidian, if bizarre, topics. (One proposed list of subjects for report included 'the shouts and gestures of motorists' and 'beards, armpits and

eyebrows'.) Jennings's films still fascinate because of the coexistence of these elements in certain shots. In *London Can Take It* (1940) a gent in a business suit steps smartly through the space where his shop window ought to be in a blitzed London street, and the elaborate frames on the walls of the National Gallery surround a void. One photograph in the book captures this dualism: a shiny wet street in Bolton in 1939 looks at first like a dull realism, and then takes on the super clarity of Magritte's 'Empire of Lights'.

The same apparent contradictions might be found in his attitudes to class and culture. The broadcast talks included in the Reader contrast sharply with his critical writing. In the latter, before and after the World War II, he is astringently critical of the English theatre as philistine and anti-intellectual, preferring the Marx Brothers, Sandy Powell and Eddie Cantor because of their capacity to change the viewer ('Eddie . . . comes right out at you'). But in the broadcast scripts, the sound of a confident young critic gives way, at times, to that of the 'condescending toff' whom Jackson wants to deny. In one talk, William Blake's 'Tiger' is called a 'smackingly good poem' and T. S. Eliot's 'The Boston Evening Transcript' is offered as an example of poetry which can 'talk about something fairly ordinary, fairly up-to-date, in a fairly ordinary way'. The verse cited has the lines: 'I mount the steps and ring the bell, turning/Wearily, as one would turn to nod good-bye to La Rochefoucauld/If the street were time and he at the end of the street'. Ordinary for Eliot and Jennings maybe, but a touch surreal for some of us. At the end of the script, Jennings promises next week to say more about the role of the modern poet through an analysis of the poems of Patience Strong. Sadly, the talk, if he ever gave it, is not included.

If some of Jennings's writing strikes a false note now, however, these faults have to be set against the importance of the tasks he set himself, and the nature of the solutions offered by his films. The Reader offers so much evidence of Jennings attempting to reconcile, in thought and experience, the contradictions he inhabited. Like the Futurists, he wanted to celebrate science and technology in art, and to indicate that these forces had shaped national identity as much as art; unlike some of the Futurists, he images this technology as open for humane, communal use towards a common end. In a nation chronically dominated by the hegemonic high cultural pretensions of its capital city, Jennings wanted to demonstrate there were other forms of culture in other places, even if his view was necessarily an external one.

Spare Time has been seen for a long time as the *locus classicus* of Jennings's concern with culture and class, but the letters and broadcast transcript about *The Silent Village* (1943) give an equally moving insight into the nature of his preoccupation. *The Silent Village* was made in Wales as a response to the virtual elimination, in 1942, of the Czechoslovakian village of Lidice by the German army of occupation.

Jennings wanted to show, with the help of anti-Nazi refugees, ‘not only the reconstruction of the Lidice story, but also the clash of two types of culture’. Jennings uses the film to contrast the ‘new-fangled, loudspeaker, blaring culture invented by Dr Goebbels and his satellites’ with the lived culture embodied in the Welsh language and its traditions. Jennings, with some of his crew and their families, lived with the miners in their homes during the making of the film, and he records his anxiety to represent them as they are, ‘not just as individuals – as we did in the fire film (*Fires Were Started*) – but also as a class, with an understanding between us: so they don’t feel we are just photographing them as curios or wild animals, or “just for propaganda”’.

Jennings’s writing, as much as his filmmaking, testifies to his struggle to say something worthwhile about national identities. He tries to say and to show that ‘British’ is culturally richer than ‘English’, and that English culture is more than the Queen, Nelson’s Column and the National Gallery. *Listen to Britain* proposes that ‘Roll out the Barrel’ is as much a part of a nation’s heritage as Mozart’s Piano Concerto in G, even if the latter, as the post-production script indicates, is to be temporarily drowned by the noise of a munitions factory. In wartime, when other documentarists unambiguously celebrated Britain (usually imaged only as England), regretted the French capitulation, and vilified Germany, Jennings shows a sensitivity to European culture which goes beyond simple appropriation. In a short broadcast to occupied France in 1941, he talks very simply in French about the rich interaction between French and English painters in the nineteenth century, and evokes French paintings as a luminous antidote to the blackout of Britain. In this propaganda broadcast, direct references to Germany are brief but telling, tinged more with regret than rage. At the time of his death in 1950 at the age of forty-three, Jennings was researching in Greece for a film about postwar changes in Europe.

Despite all the evidence offered in the Reader, Jennings remains an enigma. Jackson suggests that all Jennings’s best work is, in a sense, an attempt to answer the question ‘who are we?’ I think that the ‘we’ in this sentence refers to the English, and it is Jennings’s writing about the English which exemplifies, for me, his enigmatic qualities.

Looking at the English from the outside, one or two obvious facts stand out which the English themselves ignore completely. Their ruthlessness for example. The English in America exterminated one race, the Red Indians, almost completely, and imported another race, the Negroes, as slaves, on whom they inflicted unspeakable brutalities. . . . The English are in fact a violent, savage race; passionately artistic, enormously addicted to pattern with a faculty . . . of ignoring their neighbours, their surroundings, or in the last resort, themselves (pp. 237–8).

These remarks, made in a book review in 1948, seem at first to be sharply critical of the English, and yet the tone of the review as a whole, and even the last quotation, shows how easily and disarmingly a self-effacing superiority emerges. As with the films, there is an uneasy feeling that one has fallen for the most subtle and stylish of class or national propaganda: self-congratulation as art.

Jackson is right, though. Maybe the English, at any rate, need reminding that there was once an English filmmaker who was a polymath, a member of the intelligentsia, a socialist and a surrealist, a person who would speak about culture, class and nationality without sounding, or perhaps being, sectarian, smug, cynical or smart-arse.